

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

REASONS FOR THIS BOOK .....	7
ON THE JOB TRAINING .....	9
LEFT BEHIND .....	17
GUATEMALA WITH LOVE .....	21
HIS LIGHT SHONE IN MY SOUL .....	25
PARADISE LOST .....	35
PARADISE FOUND .....	43
THE CALL .....	53
IN HIS PRESENCE .....	59
UNTO THE LEAST OF THESE .....	65
THE TRYING OF OUR FAITH .....	71
WHERE MOST NEEDED .....	75
OUR MUSICAL JOURNEY .....	81
HIS PROVISION .....	91
WHAT A THRILL .....	99

Published by  
***The Singing Avilas***

c/o Latin American Ministries  
P.O. Box 334  
Mount Gilead, Ohio 43338

First Printing 2003

**FOREWORD**

God's fingerprints could not be missed when our headquarters was moved from the West Coast to Indiana in the mid-60s. A primary benefit was closer contact with 75% of our OMS and MFM loyal intercessors and supporters. But equally important evidence of providential guidance emerged with the vital gain of new resources and ministry partners.

One such serendipity began with a phone call to my office. "Can you come home now?" my wife asked. "We have guests who want to talk with you."

We had known and loved Valetta Steel (Crumly) since her high school days. But I'd never met Joe Chitwood from southern Indiana, who had brought a rather shy, unassuming Mexican couple. Joe quickly introduced Simon and Cecilia, then announced the purpose for their visit.

"I want to join your Men For Missions Crusade group to South America," he said. "And I believe the Avilas would be a tremendous asset on the trip. They speak Spanish and have a wonderful testimony. "But just wait 'til you hear them sing!"

To my, "I'm ready right now," Simon and Cecilia graciously complied. I don't recall the song, but could not have been more impressed with their excellent harmony and the Holy Spirit's obvious presence and anointing as they sang.

Since that day the Avilas have added immeasurably to our outreach, not only in South America but also all across Canada and the United States. Other organizations, as well, have gained greatly from their ministry, through which thousands have been drawn to the foot of the cross.

A most unusual and endearing practice of the Avilas is to never set a price or request offerings. Nor do they reject opportunities according

to size of the crowd. Yet, without fail they give 200% whenever and "wherever needed." Always sensitive to the Spirit, they readily pull from their broad repertoire just the right message for the moment. And for any unforeseen problem or necessary change in the program, their cheerful adjustment is sure.

We heartily thank the Lord and the Avilas for the joy of claiming them as a part of the OMS/MFM family, as well as our own. They have enriched, challenged, and inspired us beyond telling. You will know why as you trace God's hand throughout the remarkable story awaiting you.

-Harry G. Burr  
Executive Director Emeritus  
Men For Missions International



Harry & Eleanor Burr

## SPECIAL THANKS

We owe a great debt of gratitude to Mrs. Eleonor Burr for her expertise and arduous work editing this work; our thanks also to Harry Burr, for his kind comments in the foreword—both Harry and Eleonor have played a vital part in our lives and ministry.

Special thanks to our supporters, financial and otherwise, who have made it so much easier to carry out our assignments in ministry. It is our privilege to be workers together in God's great Kingdom.

Through the years many of our friends have welcomed us in their homes, lodged us, fed us, and encouraged us; thank you so very much.

The following names are people who have gone "beyond the call of duty" and allowed us to become regular "pests" in their homes year after year: Archie and Mari Lou Porter, Lou and Ethel Mayer, Eleonor Case, Michael and Patsy Clark, D & D Missionary Homes, Don and Jolene Harms, Mrs. Ardith Frisbie, and Jerry and Marilyn Mawis, etc.

Thanks to my wife, Cecilia, for her encouragement and help in remembering the events and stories in this book; to our children, for allowing us to write personal family happenings essential to relating the history of Christ in our lives. Thank you for reading this book.



The Avilas

*To two beautiful  
People, Dale & Marsha,*

*Simon*

*Cecilia*

*Rom. 8:28*



Missions Conference somewhere in the U.S.A.

## REASONS FOR THIS BOOK

A story is told about a minister who went to visit an old gentleman, hoping to lead him to faith in Christ for the salvation of his soul.

"Sir," the minister inquired, "do you ever think of the hereafter?"

"Oh sure," came the quick reply, "I think about it every time I go downstairs, to the garage, or into town. I keep asking myself, 'What am I here after?'"

Well, because of the frequency with which I've been using those words lately, I began to write down a few thoughts and experiences from Cecilia's and my life as a couple and in particular as Gospel singers involved in evangelism and the promotion of home and foreign missions. My intention for doing this was for the sole benefit of our children and grandchildren, so that in the "hereafter" they would be able to read about their grandma and grandpa's faith in Jesus.

After I finished writing the first two experiences, I showed Cecilia what I was doing. She exclaimed, seemingly shocked, "Oh Honey, this is good! Keep writing. This might turn out to be a nice little book our friends would enjoy reading. They might even draw inspiration from the lessons we have learned in our lives and ministry."

So, before we forget what we're here after, please read, laugh, and cry with us. We will share much more in our hereafter, in our Father's Kingdom.

*Simon and Cecilia*



Early Days  
Advertisement Photo

Fund raising for first  
missionary trip to Colombia  
and Ecuador.  
First Church of God in  
Ithaca, Michigan.



## ON THE JOB TRAINING

For whatever reason, when you stand in line to go through customs at the international airport in Bogotá, Colombia, you get as nervous as you probably would if you were carrying a suitcase full of crack cocaine. You know there is absolutely no reason to be afraid. Yet, your heart seems to be in your throat wanting to come out. Little did I know there was plenty of reason to be nervous about this time.

When my turn came for the immigration officer to check my documents, he took a quick glance, pushed them to one side of his desk, and asked me to stand aside and wait. All 20 members in our group went through with no difficulty while I stood there awkwardly wondering why I had to wait so long. When the last person went through, he came around his desk. With no explanations whatsoever, and in a firm authoritative voice, he said to me:

*"Lo siento mucho señor (I am very sorry, sir), but you cannot stay here in Colombia."* Then he proceeded to take me by the arm and lead me outside the building.

By this time I was really getting scared. But I managed to ask, "Is there a particular reason why I cannot visit your country?"

Again, noticing my agonizing state of nervousness, he matter-of-factly said, "Your papers are not in order."

"But, sir," I replied, "all our documents were carefully checked at the Miami International Airport in the U.S.A. We were assured everything was in order."

"Well," he said, "it isn't what they say that matters. It is what I say here that counts. I am going to talk to the captain of the plane in which you arrived and have him take you to Ecuador. Maybe you can get your papers straightened out over there."

By this time my nerves were really shot; I was having a hard time trying to think straight. I'd never been in South America before and now this man was going to send me off to heaven-knows-where.

"Sir, please, there are 20 other people in my group including my wife. None of them has any idea what's happening. May I go and at least let my wife know I can't stay here in Colombia? She has my birth certificate and other things I will probably need wherever I'm going."

"All right," he said, "make it fast while I talk to the pilot."

My wife sensed in her heart there was something seriously wrong as I came running toward her.

"What's happening, Honey?" she asked. "What's holding things up?" I could see concern and fear in her beautiful dark brown eyes.

"I really don't know, Sweetheart, the officer says my papers are not in order; therefore, I can't stay here in this country. He says I have to go to Ecuador and I might be able to secure the documents I need there. Then I will be able to return to Bogotá. Give me my birth certificate and get the group to pray for God's strength and wisdom to guide me in the coming days."

Harry Burr, our crusade director, walked back to the plane with me. He tried to reason with the immigration official only to find the ever-present barrier, "No speak English, *señor, lo siento mucho*."

As I boarded the plane, Harry managed to ask, "Simon, have you got any money?"

"No," I replied, "Cecilia has the travelers checks and they are all in her name."

"Here," he said, handing me a fifty dollar bill which he hurriedly found in his pocket.

I felt sorry for Harry. In his many years with Men for Missions International, leading this type of crusade all over the world, I don't believe he ever faced this kind of problem. He was as helpless and frustrated as I was. I am sure he gave me words of encouragement and hope. But I was so bewildered and confused, all I could do was mind the orders of the immigration officer.

\*\*\*

It wasn't very long after this seemingly endless ordeal, that I found myself sitting in that airplane and flying more than 30,000 feet above sea level. Feeling sorry for myself and licking my wounds, I was having the biggest pity party you ever did see. Oh, the view was breathtaking as the plane soared over the beautiful Andes Mountains. Yet, my mind was reeling in confusion and utter desperation. Yes, I sobbed and complained to the Lord as a child would complain to its father. "Why, Lord?" I asked. "I came to work for You; I left my job for two weeks to come on this trip, and now You let all these things

10

happen. Besides, I don't even know where I'm going, or whether I will ever see my wife and two beautiful daughters again. Lord, where are You? I really don't need to be here. Please help me."

Now, don't be too harsh on me for not being the brave and confident Christian one should be during a time of boot training in God's army. I was a young believer in Jesus. I knew He had saved me, and I was really excited about serving Him with my singing abilities. But, I didn't understand His ways as I understand them now. When I was challenged to come on this trip to share my newfound faith, I couldn't pass up the chance. What an honor this seemed to be for my wife and me.

\*\*\*

When our plane finally landed in beautiful Quito, Ecuador, the captain promptly introduced me to the immigration authorities. They led me to a small office where I was told to take everything out of my pockets. As they looked through my papers and the few things I had (My luggage had stayed in Colombia), one of the two officers inquired regarding the purpose of my trip.

"I came to Colombia and Ecuador to see our missionary friends working in these countries and also to share the good news of the Gospel of Christ with your people," I answered.

"Well now," one of them said, "why didn't they let you stay in Colombia?"

"They didn't think my documents were in order, and they were confident I would be able to have them straightened out here in Quito," I told them.

When they sensed my nervousness and inexperience in dealing with this type of situation, they really began to harass and intimidate me—which they found very easy to do.

"If the immigration officers in Bogotá didn't want you in their country, why should we want you here?" the chubby officer asked, relishing the advantage he had over me. "Also," he continued, "there are some discrepancies in your documents that lead us to believe they have been forged. Furthermore," he emphasized, "for all we know, you may be a Cuban spy, or a terrorist here on a mission from

11

Fidel Castro or Che Guevara." (All this happened in January 1967. Cuba was busy during that time exporting communism and terrorism throughout Latin America).

"The bottom line is this," said the other officer, trying to do his part to better enjoy the drama that was emerging. "We are going to have to put you in jail until we develop the film you have in your camera. We just can't be too careful these days, you know."

In sheer frustration and helplessness, I managed to give my feeble, but under the circumstances, my most courageous witness to my faith and commitment to my blessed Lord. I said to them, "Gentlemen, I have given my life to Jesus Christ. It is not mine, but neither is it yours to dispose of as you please. I believe that whatever you end up doing with me is going to have to be in accordance with His will." I didn't use bravado in my voice as I said these words. But strangely enough, it was then that my dull and fearful heart began to realize God was in all of this. That there was a reason and a purpose for all that was happening all around me. I wasn't over my fears as yet, but I sensed deep in my spirit, as I recall, that none of this was an accident or a humorous trick on God's part.

After what seemed to be an eternal battery of questions and senseless accusations, both officers left the room, leaving me with a news reporter who appeared to be more friendly than his two compatriots. "Cigarette?" he offered. "It might help calm your nerves."

"No, thanks," I replied. Suddenly I began to feel a freedom and a boldness that had eluded me throughout this whole experience. "You see, sir," I continued, "I was a literal slave to cigarettes for 14 years of my life. It has been only a short time since God delivered me from that habit. I really appreciate your kindness, though. That in itself has a calming effect on my nerves, believe me."

It wasn't very long before my two "inquisitors" returned and escorted me to another office. There an older gentleman examined my papers. Without saying a word, he folded them up, handed them to me, and then uttered the most beautiful words I'd heard all day: "Let him go."

Needless to say, I was overjoyed, thankful, and elated to be free from the hands of those who had the power to make my life extremely difficult, not to mention right down miserable. In my excitement,

however, I failed to notice that although I was now free to move about, those immigration officers had not registered my name in their records. Therefore, when Harry Burr and my wife tried repeatedly to find my whereabouts, the Ecuadorian authorities could only say, "We have no record of his having entered the country. *Lo siento mucho....*"

\*\*\*

Cecilia was devastated, as one might imagine. The crusade had to continue with the schedule that had been so carefully planned months in advance. Up to this point in our singing ministry, Cecilia had never sung solo. But now she had to find not only the strength to bear the uncertainty and agony of our separation, but also to obey the call God had placed in her life—singing. He used her talents and the testimony of our situation mightily to touch many hearts in Colombia.

Cecilia is one of the sweetest, most helpful, and loving people on this side of heaven. But she can also be a very strong and determined woman on God's earth. She has a way about her that when she says something, she does not expect an argument. She expects action, as Harry Burr was about to find out.

"Harry," she looked at him eyeball-to-eyeball as she talked, "I've done everything you asked me to do so far. But I am not moving another inch from this spot where I'm standing until you go find my husband."

\*\*\*

The Mexican consul in Quito could not issue the one document requested by the immigration authorities in Colombia and Ecuador. But he was most helpful in other ways. "*Señor Avila, lo siento mucho* for not being able to help you, but I know some missionaries who are teaching me how to speak English. They might be able to help you. I'll pick you up this evening around 5:30."

"I will be ready," I assured him.

That evening I met some of the most precious people in the world—some of God's choicest servants working at the powerful HCJB Christian radio station. One of the missionaries, the late Bob Savage,

personally welcomed me and offered to take care of me until my wife and the rest of the group could join me—of all places, there at the radio station compound. Our group just happened to be scheduled to visit the station the following week. Again I began to feel that sneaky suspicion God had His hand in all of this. I didn't know for a while whether to be upset at Him or to be awed at the way He was teaching Cecilia and me about Himself and about trusting Him completely. How could I be upset?

Of course, Cecilia's impassioned yet tender plea for immediate action was graciously rewarded. Unknown to her, Harry had already made a reservation for the next flight to Quito to search for his one lost sheep—me.

It was now Sunday afternoon, and I was returning from a singing engagement at a Baptist church. As I approached the station's compound, I could not believe my eyes. There, standing by the gate, was Harry Burr with the biggest smile you ever did see. Harry is quite a handsome brother, but he never looked better than he did that day.

"Simon, we've been really worried about you."

"You've been worried," I retorted, half amused at his remark.

We hugged and shared with each other all that we had been through. He assured me of Cecilia's well-being and how anxious she was to see me. "Unfortunately," he said, "you two will not be able to see each other for another week. I have something I want you to do for the Mission. Are you ready to go to work?"

"Ready to go to work?" I replied incredulously. "What do you think I've been doing all this time? I have another singing engagement yet this afternoon. But yes, I'm as you put it, 'ready to go to work.' Tell me what it is you want me to do."

"OK, OK, Simon, here's what I want you to do. I'm going to get you a plane ticket to the city of Guayaquil. Our Mission (OMS International) has a team of national workers over in Quevedo, trying to establish a brand new church. They are doing in-depth evangelism and part of their strategy is to visit every home in the period of two months. They need help and encouragement. I believe they will appreciate your singing and personal testimony. The group, and Cecilia, of course, will meet you in the port city of Guayaquil in a few days."

Excited doesn't adequately express the feelings I had to be in a foreign country sharing about Jesus my Lord. Then again, neither does lonesome describe my longing to see my wife and my gorgeous daughters. "All in due time," I consoled myself, "all in due time...."

\*\*\*

"Come and hear Simon Avila, a Mexican singer, this evening at 5:00 p.m. at the park and at 8:00 o'clock tonight at our church!" shouted my newfound friend and brother. We announced our services through the streets of Quevedo with a portable PA system. "Come and hear the beautiful story of how Jesus saved him and called him to sing for His glory. Come one, come all; it is all free!" Now, I don't want to sound pretentious, but this brother seemed convinced that I was being a great help to the team and the overall ministry of planting a new church in this city.

The week went by so fast that before I knew it, it was time to go to Guayaquil and rejoin the group. My heart was now torn with mixed emotions. I wanted to run to see my wife and the rest of the group, but I also wanted to stay a little longer and continue working with my new friends. Yes, a new church was planted in the city of Quevedo to the honor and glory of God.

What a thrill it is to realize that God allows people the likes of us to have a small part in building His Kingdom in Ecuador. The many lessons He taught us of trust, obedience, and abandonment to His will were what we needed to learn. It was preparation for the life of faith He subsequently called us to live in the area of Gospel music. Looking back, neither my wife nor I, nor the family, regret one moment of our lives in the service of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. We have gone back many times to Ecuador and worked in uncounted areas of the country. But, of course, my papers are now in order; I am a naturalized citizen of the United States of America. But we like to think that back in 1967 we were where God wanted us to be and where we were needed for His eternal purposes. The lessons and the trials were added bonuses for our benefit.





Doña Beatrice Zapata, missionary; First Lady of Guatemala, Doña Teresa de Rios Mont and Cecilia at Presidential Palace.



Working with Evangelist Luis Palau in Mexico



Radio ministry in Guatemala.

## LEFT BEHIND

This can't be happening to me, I thought. This is stuff for the movies or for some believe-it-or-not tale in a tabloid magazine. This can't be real life. But traveling with Louie Farina (not his real name), our pianist, anything was possible and probable.

Louie and I were returning from a Men For Missions conference in Haysville, North Carolina in our small but quite comfortable motor home. The schedule had been hectic—singing at breakfast rallies, mid-morning sessions, luncheons, evening services, and an afterglow rendezvous each night. Cecilia had not been able to go with us; so Louie and I had to work a little extra hard. Needless to say, I was exhausted.

Before Louie joined us in the ministry, I had always done the driving to all our meetings. So when he joined us I made an effort to have him lend a hand at the wheel. It wasn't long, however, before I discovered his propensity to forget things. Now, Louie was a brilliant young man with an extraordinary musical talent. He had spent a great deal of his life in show business. But driving a motor home was not his forte; he'd forget where we were going or make the wrong turn on the road, etc.

We left North Carolina and drove across the beautiful Smoky Mountains. The scenery was out of this world but my eyes and body needed rest. Finally, as we drove into the state of Kentucky I asked, "Hey Louie, could you drive for a while? I am so bushed I think I'm seeing double. I have to take a break before I go off the road and cause an accident."

Louie was a careful driver; he was just forgetful about a lot of things. "Oh, sure Simon, I'll be glad to drive; I've been sleeping since we left, so I'm ready to take over," was his enthusiastic response.

"Thanks, brother, I really appreciate the help. I'll just climb up on the top bunk and rest for a while," I told him.

He drove for perhaps a half hour before he awakened me with, "We're running out of gas."

"Where are we, anyway?" I asked him.

"We're near Mt. Vernon, Kentucky," he answered. "Should I stop there?"

"That's fine."

At the gas station I felt the need for a restroom. So I climbed down right behind Louie, handed him money for the gas, and went into the building. I wasn't in there very long at all. But when I came out, to my utter surprise and amazement, I saw my motor home driving up the ramp onto the I-75 freeway. Flabbergasted, I could not believe my eyes. I must be dreaming, I thought, I'm losing it.

But it was true; Louie had left me behind.

After regaining my composure, I thought, I'll give him 15 minutes to remember he saw me get off the motor home. If he doesn't remember by that time, I'll call the state police and see if they can head him off somewhere.

After 15 minutes I called the police, but they were unable to locate Louie. He told me later he just felt so good thinking I had finally learned to trust his driving. Assuming I was sound asleep on the top bunk, he drove on into Ohio.

The gas tank on the motor home had a capacity of only 23 gallons or so, and we could get only six or seven miles per gallon. Consequently, Louie had to stop and refuel somewhere near Dayton.

He later said he had gotten out of the motor home at a gas station, used their restroom, and then returned to wake me up so I could pay for the gas. Except, I wasn't there. He could feel a panic attack coming over him at the possibility he might have.... No, that couldn't be, he thought. Simon probably went into the station through the back door. He looked for me everywhere, going around the motor home several times. Finally he reached two very sobering conclusions: The Rapture has taken place! Jesus took Simon to heaven and I didn't make it. Or, hopefully, I left him at the last gas station. But where did we stop last? Louie simply couldn't remember.

\*\*\*

When I called Cecilia at home in Michigan, I said, "Honey, you will not believe what Louie just did."

"Oh, yea," she said, "just try me."

"Well, Louie just took off in the motor home and left me stranded out here somewhere near Mt. Vernon, Kentucky, along I-75." I explained.

"He did what?" She practically shouted loud enough that I could hear her clear across two states without the telephone. Then she went into hysterics. She laughed so hard she wasn't much help for a long time.

"It isn't funny, Darling," I muttered.

"Oh, I am sorry, Hon, I just can't stop laughing; this is too much," she finally managed to say.

"I need to figure out what I'm going to do," I continued, "so call Tara (his wife) and tell her what happened; we need to establish contact with Louie. He might call home."

Meanwhile, I am going to call the Men For Missions office in Lexington; it isn't too far from here. If Tom Gold, the regional director, is there, he might be able to come and get me."

\*\*\*

Louie and I had planned to drive that day to Springfield, Ohio, and spend the night there with friends. Eventually Louie decided that he was really sure of his salvation and that the Rapture could not have happened without him going up with the redeemed. So, he decided to go on to Springfield and hope I would somehow contact him there.

\*\*\*

Janice Gold, Tom's wife, was able to find a mutual friend, Jack Black, to drive over to Mt. Vernon and take me to his home. It was humorous and a little embarrassing at times to relate my story to everyone I met. Before long it was well known all over the country through Men For Missions and OMS International, its parent organization. Who ever said the Christian life was boring?

That evening I was able to purchase a plane ticket to fly home the next day. I would be home long before Louie would get there. That sounded good, almost fair. But, no, Louie didn't mean to leave me behind. As a matter-of-fact, after I finally made contact with him, he wanted to drive back to Lexington and get me that same night. Needless to say, Louie felt so bad he wanted to pay for my plane ticket; he also wanted to know how he could ever make it up to me.

"Louie," I said, "this will be one of the highlights in my life that some day may make an interesting chapter in a book. But I'm driving from now on, OK?"



The Porters:  
Archie and  
Mary Lou -  
St. Petersburg,  
Florida -  
Host & Hostess  
par excellence.



Friends & supporters  
Claire and Lu Nussbaum -  
Orrville, Ohio

20

## GUATEMALA WITH LOVE

The citywide evangelistic crusade in Guatemala City was in full progress at the Mateo Flores soccer stadium, when a vivacious and extremely elegant lady approached me. "Brother Simon, my name is Beatrice Zapata," she said. "I have been asked to serve as liaison between you and the president's wife."

"I beg your pardon, *Doña* Beatrice. I believe you have the wrong person: I don't understand what you are saying to me at all." The puzzled look on my face was probably more revealing than my words. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Oh," she exclaimed with a disarming smile and an understanding tone, "you and your wife are to present a concert at the Presidential House at 11:00 o'clock on Thursday morning. *Doña* Teresa, the First Lady of Guatemala, is giving a luncheon for thirty of the country's leading and most influential ladies. I am to see that you have whatever you may need for your presentation. Dr. Luis Palau, the crusade speaker, will join us shortly before noon, and he will bring a special message to these ladies."

Actually, I still thought she had the wrong person. But Sister Zapata was so enthused and excited about our being able to share the Gospel with these precious ladies that before long I was caught up in her excitement. "This will be the first time something like this has ever happened in Guatemala. Isn't it exciting?" she asked.

Now, I didn't know if this was a rhetorical question or if she expected an answer. But I managed to interrupt her long enough to say, "Why, yes, it certainly is exciting."

On Thursday morning, Sister Zapata gave Cecilia and me a brief lesson on protocol and promptly introduced us to *Doña* Teresa, the wife of General Efraín Ríos Montt, president of Guatemala. *Doña* Teresa was most kind and accommodating, a very gracious hostess. Her regal appearance greatly contrasted her attitude of humility and Christian servanthood. "We will have two hundred ladies in attendance instead of the thirty we had planned," she informed us, with a rather pleased look on her countenance.

The Lord once again blessed us with His sweet anointing and such holy boldness that it wasn't difficult to overcome our nervousness,

21

fears, and apprehensions. After all, this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience only He could engineer to reach such a select group of people.

Luis, often referred to as the Billy Graham of Latin America, brought a powerful challenge to these women, leading them to a time of decision. At the conclusion of the program, 53 of these precious souls came to know Christ as their personal Savior and Lord of their lives.

"Yes," as *Doña Beatrice* had said, "isn't this exciting?"

#### SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

During this crusade in 1982, the atmosphere throughout the country was permeated with a powerful sense of spiritual fervor and renewal. One of the main reasons was their celebration that year commemorating the first centennial of the Gospel coming to Guatemala. Secondly, their new president was a Spirit-filled man who openly witnessed to his faith. His unabashed love for Jesus and His Word was reaching "blessed" epidemic proportions within the Christian community. Believers seemed to be strangely motivated to find the biggest Bible they could buy and proudly carry it under their arm wherever they went as a witness to their Christian commitment and in support of their beloved president.

The luncheon at the presidential residence was only one of the many extra-curricular activities carried out during the eight days of ministry at the stadium. Rallies were held at the military headquarters as well as at prominent restaurants and hotels for business people, couples, men, and women respectively. There also were programs for the youth and for the children, plus a daily school of evangelism for those involved in ministry.

Five thousand people responded to the invitation for salvation through faith in Jesus that week as a result of our efforts and, most of all, the blessed anointing of the Holy Spirit.

#### THE CLOUD OF TERRORISM

For many years the dark cloud of terrorism had overshadowed the nation. Thousands of lives had been lost. Farms had been ransacked

and burned to the ground, cattle slaughtered, and crops torched in the fields. Terrorist bands stopped busses. The passengers were robbed and often beaten at the slightest provocation, and the busses set on fire.

Anonymous telephone calls to the offices of Luis Palau had threatened his life if he went through with the crusade as advertised. The threats were not taken lightly, so special security measures were necessary each night at the stadium. One evening, there was an electrical power failure in that section of the city while we sat on the platform prior to the service. It wasn't a prolonged blackout, but when the lights came on, Luis had been whisked out of the stadium into a place of safety in a matter of seconds. Such was the situation at that time in Guatemala.

#### BEFORE THE '82 CRUSADE

At the height of all this terrorist activity in 1981, Cecilia and I were invited to participate in four different crusades under the auspices of the Luis Palau Evangelistic Association offices in Guatemala City. In light of all the terrible reports we had received through the news media of bombings, kidnappings, and massacres, I could only commit myself to go alone. As it turned out, I was very glad God had directed in that decision.

The tension was so overwhelming for a while, that panic threatened to render me ineffective and totally useless in the work God had called us to do. Some of my Guatemalan brothers, trying to be helpful, said, "Brother Simon, don't let the news reports scare you. Things are pretty safe here in the city; most of the terrorist activity is out on the western side of the country."

Well, that's a relief, I thought. Then I asked my "helpful friends," "Where are the crusades to be held for the next couple of weeks?"

"Oh," they replied, "they're all going to be...on the western...side...."

As I prayed for God's wisdom and strength, I found comfort in the knowledge that a host of friends who support our ministry would be praying for me, and that Cecilia and the children were also praying for me back home. Now, when I say, "I prayed," I mean, I did some

serious praying—desperate-like praying. It was a Peter-kind of prayer, "Lord, save me, I'm beginning to sink." Sure enough, the Lord came to my rescue, impressing on my mind to stop reading the newspaper, stop listening to the radio, and stop watching the news reports on television. "Read My Word, son, keep your eyes on Me. Let Me take care of all the details on this trip. I am in charge." He seemed to say,

#### *"I AM IN CHARGE"*

In charge He was! As previously mentioned, 1982 was a very special year in God's calendar. It was a celebration on a grand scale of the first centennial of His Gospel coming into Guatemala. The terrorists could not prevail in thwarting the all-out plans of His church to proclaim His praises in gratitude for the gift of salvation through His blessed Son. God was about to do the impossible:

By April of '82, the government was overthrown in a military coup, and the presidency was then offered to retired General Efraín Ríos Montt who just happened to be an outstanding brother in Christ. He was held in highest regard throughout the country for his integrity, leadership qualities, and strength of character. The change that came over the land was nothing short of miraculous. Terrorism weakened its stronghold and the corrupt leaders from the previous government were fairly tried in accordance to the laws of the nation.

With this new freedom, the church moved forward with all its plans. Local congregations enjoyed a time of aggressive evangelism and unprecedented growth. They worked in unity to bring the activities to a grand finale in the month of November. The crusade with Luis Palau was the culmination of all their efforts. On the last day, an estimated crowd of approximately 700,000 people gathered at an open field. The crusade closed, as it is often said, "in a blaze of glory," literally!

Cecilia and I were privileged to be the guest singers for the crusade. "*Doña Beatrice*, it was exciting!"

#### *HIS LIGHT SHONE IN MY SOUL*

"Believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," thundered the young evangelist, trying to convince us to give our hearts to Christ. "This is what the Bible teaches, and we must base our salvation on what God says in His Word," he continued. At the end of each message he would give us an invitation to come to the front of the chapel and publicly make a profession of faith in Christ for the salvation of our souls.

The young man preached with great conviction, and his messages were inspiring. The majority of the audience, however, including me, came from a non-evangelical background. His messages, quite frankly, seemed a bit confusing. In my Mexican heritage and tradition, I had believed in Christ since my infancy, not out of personal choice, but rather by birth. I had inherited my religion from generations past, dating back to the Spanish conquest of my country. I just never questioned the veracity and authenticity of my religion. The hierarchy of our religious group knew the doctrine and history of our church. As long as they knew, we just didn't feel we needed to bother with the details of our faith.

When the evangelist questioned our belief in Jesus Christ, rather than responding to his invitation, I reasoned within myself, Why should I go forward? I have always believed in Jesus. I've been baptized as a child; I've made my first communion; I've read the catechism, etc., etc. If belief in Christ is all it takes to be saved, then I must be saved. Why should I need to go to the front of the chapel? It all just didn't compute in my religious mind. Evidently I wasn't the only one thinking that way. Hardly any of the other students went forward as we had been challenged to do.

Another message we often heard had to do with calling on the name of the Lord in order to be saved, based on Romans 10:13: "For whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Again the message seemed just as confusing to me and to most of the students. Our parents had brought us up to always make the sign of the cross by bending our index finger and putting our thumb across it, thus forming a cross. We would place the cross on our forehead saying, "In the name of the Father," put it on our chest and say, "the

Son;" then move it to our left shoulder saying, "and the Holy;" pass it over to the right shoulder and say, "Spirit." Finishing up, we'd place the cross over our mouth in a kiss of reverence and devotion. Well, to me this was even better than what these people preached. I didn't just call on the name of the Lord, I called on the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Again, why should I go forward to call on the name of the Lord? I did it several times a day...everyday...and everywhere.

If you are an evangelical believer reading this book, let me ask you a question. Have you ever tried to explain the way of salvation to a religious person? It is almost impossible to convince them of their need to know the living Christ and persuade them they can have assurance of salvation here on earth and a home in heaven when they die. Only God can convince them of their need. You might even wonder at this point whether those dear folks ever got anywhere with me. Read on.

\*\*\*

I was born and raised in the old country of Mexico, back in one of the most beautiful spots in the whole wide world. My hometown is nestled in a picturesque valley along the Nazas River in the state of Durango. It is surrounded by majestic mountains that rival any other mountains in their rugged beauty and tranquility. Our only lifelines were the Nazas River and the occasional rainfall that revived our hopes to face each year.

My daddy didn't like working for other people, so most of his life he was self-employed; you might even say he was somewhat of a businessman. His business consisted of a fruit stand on Main Street. When things were going well he would add candies, sweet bread, and just about anything on which he could make a profit. During harvest time he would send my mother and me to surrounding towns with a donkey loaded with merchandise. Mom would also bake bread and quite often they would send me around town with a basket full of bread. I hated to do that, especially when my school buddies were around. Whenever there were people near me, I wouldn't advertise what I was selling; I was too embarrassed. But when there wasn't

anybody within blocks, I would holler at the top of my lungs, "Fresh bread, just out of the oven. Come and get your bread!"

Of course during the slow times between crops all of us lived on "IOU's." There was a lot of hunger, a lot of need. Our winters were hard, not weather-wise but simply because of unemployment. There wasn't much to do.

Spiritually we were devout, as I implied earlier. Our devotion, however, for the most part included only women and children attending rosaries, catechism classes, and an occasional mass when the priest visited our town on special days. Men just didn't seem to have the need or desire to attend church; they were too *macho*. Besides, they had learned all they needed as children. I absorbed the teachings of our church with utmost reverence. In the deep recesses of my heart I harbored the desire to someday study for the priesthood.

As I entered into my adolescent years, however, the faith that had guided me through my childhood, came into deadly conflict with the scientific concepts I was required to learn in school, mainly the theory of evolution. Although I could easily reject evolution on the basis that it was merely a theory, it nevertheless shook the foundations of my faith. An equally devastating blow to my belief in God and the church came as a result of my own flesh conspiring against me on all fronts. I was now studying at a government-supported boys school in the capital city of Durango, away from restraints of family and friends. The temptations that surrounded me were overwhelming. Needless to say, skepticism and unbelief were convenient allies that drove me away from the child-like faith I had known. I still believed that God was around but I couldn't find enough "fig leaves" to cover my guilt and shame.

By the time I graduated from secondary school in Durango, my family—in search of a better way of life—had finally moved away from our hometown into Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua across from El Paso, Texas. They wanted to live a little closer to what many have called "The promised land that flows with milk and honey," the United States of America. So, that's where I came to reside with my family. Unable to continue my education I hoped that opportunities for work would be much better in the city than they would ever be in my hometown.

What a fascinating sight it was for me to stand on the banks of the Rio Grande and wistfully gaze across the border at magnificent buildings and obvious affluence just a few hundred yards away. I wasn't envious or resentful at the contrast between the two countries; it was just an awesome sight to behold.

In the afternoons I would walk over to the international bridge and look at the tourists crossing by the thousands each day to shop for souvenirs, eat at the fancy restaurants on Juarez Avenue or see floor shows at nightclubs all along the main area of town. Most fascinating of all was to hear them jibber-jabber in English. I had taken English classes in school but hadn't learned enough to understand when people actually spoke it, especially with a Southern drawl. "Dees ees very een-t-e-r-e-s-t-e-e-n-g," I would mutter in my own accent.

\*\*\*

"*Mi hijo* (my son)," my older sister asked me one day (all my sisters called me son. I was the youngest in the family), "how would you like to learn to speak English? I know a school in El Paso where they specialize in teaching Spanish-speaking kids. I will pay the tuition for one year. What do you say?"

I was elated. "You really mean it, Sis? I would love to learn the language," I reassured her. "When do I start?"

"Not so fast, kiddo," she said with a smile. "First we need to see if we can get you enrolled. Then we'll have to get you a crossing card so you can get past the border everyday, and a few other things we'll need to do."

"Well, I'm ready!"

\*\*\*

The setting was Lydia Patterson Institute, an old mission school supported by the Methodist Church and founded by a lady named Mrs. Lydia Patterson. Their purpose was to teach Spanish-speaking young people the English language plus—more importantly, as I later discovered—to share with the students how they could come to know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord of their lives.

28

Of course, I really had to admire these people for their dedication and great personal sacrifice. They were true professionals in their craft and undoubtedly they could have found other schools where they would receive much better pay. Teaching at LPI, however, seemed to be their way of obeying Christ's command to go and preach the Gospel to every creature. They were there out of a sense of calling God had placed on their lives.

The teachers and staff at Lydia Patterson were what I affectionately call "one-track-minded sneaky Methodists." They didn't waste any opportunity in sharing their faith and their love for Jesus. They would get us started each morning with a devotional time. Twice a week they herded us off to chapel for a half hour, and no one could graduate from that place without taking a year of Bible study. It was a required subject. Now, how sneaky can you get! Regretfully, I must say, not too many of us paid much attention, or at least we didn't let on. But they were persistent and lovingly sowed the seeds of the Gospel in our hearts. Only heaven will reveal the harvest, the fruit of their labor of love.

\*\*\*

I was a good student, I thought. I learned grammar well and my vocabulary increased tremendously. But I could not understand why one of the teachers would always give me an F or a D minus in conduct. I had straight A's in every subject but in conduct I was failing miserably.

"Miss Harmon, how can you do this to me?" I would argue. "If I were such a bad kid as you think I am, how could I get such good grades; you're making a terrible mistake." That just infuriated her to no end.

Actually, we all loved to make life miserable for Miss Harmon. She was an excellent teacher but we were an ornery, mischievous bunch. We enjoyed teasing her until she did the only thing she could to get even with us; she'd give us either an F or a D minus in conduct. After graduation, she was one of the first teachers I went to and apologized. I told her as sincerely as I knew how, how much I really loved and appreciated her. She was sweet enough to believe me and

29

gave me a hug.

At the end of my first year at LPI, I was able to work through the summer months and save enough to pay tuition fees for a few more months. I wanted to learn English as well as I could and try my very best to stay in school for as long as possible. My older sister, Cruz, carried the biggest load in supporting the family so could not help me any more. She just couldn't.

Looking back, I have been able to see the hand of God intervening on my behalf at different stages of my life. Just when my savings were at a precarious end, one of my teachers approached me with the question, "Simon, you're doing remarkably well; will you be able to complete the program LPI has to offer? Is a college education part of your vision for the future?"

I was a little embarrassed but managed to tell her I was out of money, and that that month would probably be my last at LPI.

"Please, Simon," she pleaded. "promise me you won't drop out of school before you talk to me. Will you do that for me?"

I hesitated for a moment, trying to swallow my pride and bring my *macho* mentality under control. But I finally said. "OK, Mrs. Grout, thank you for your interest in my education. I promise to let you know how my finances are holding up."

Well, Mrs. Grout didn't waste any time trying to help me. She immediately talked to the principal and then to the president of the school. I have no idea what she told them about me, but I was summoned to the president's office two days later.

"Simon," the president politely addressed me while gesturing for me to be seated. "Several members of the faculty have come to me recently and spoken very highly of your academic achievements, as well as revealed your financial situation. I have made inquiries with our board of directors and am very happy to give you good news. We are prepared to grant you a full scholarship beginning next month. From here on you will not be required to pay tuition for the duration of your stay at LPI. We have only one request to ask of you." Then he paused for a second.

"Oh, oh," my heart sank, "I'd bet he wants me to become Protestant; I just know he has strings attached to his offer. Or maybe he wants me to memorize the whole Bible." I couldn't imagine what he wanted

from me. But I couldn't have been more mistaken.

"Simon," he continued, "do you suppose you could find time in your schedule to help us for one hour each day after school? The students leave a lot of trash during lunch hour and we are terribly understaffed. It would be a great help if you would keep the grounds a little cleaner. Will you do it? We will appreciate it immensely."

"Sir, it would be a pleasure to be of help to the school. What else can I do? Just tell me and I'll do my very best."

"That is all; I am happy that you will be able to continue your education here with us." He gave me a warm handshake, a smile, and best wishes for a successful time at LPI.

I was euphoric coming out of the president's office. If you can picture the man in Acts 3, who was healed and "went walking and leaping and praising God," that was how I left that office. I wanted to shout, laugh, cry, do somersaults, stand on my head, kneel, etc. In essence, I was deeply thankful to God for His goodness to me.

In the days following that interview with the president, I couldn't stop thinking about the kindness, the love, and the attention these dear people accorded me daily. For the first time I began to wonder what it was I didn't understand about the message they seemed so eager and anxious to communicate with us. I felt I was doing a good job in refuting their theological arguments, but I had no defense against their unconditional love. I was certain they knew I wasn't "one of them." So why did they love me? Why did they want to help me? Why me? Why, why, why?

My inquisitive heart led me to observe closely their lifestyle. The way I lived compared to how they lived was as different as night and day. I considered myself to be as good a Christian as they were, but my lifestyle didn't reflect much of the teachings of Jesus. The time of what became a spiritual struggle for me was the late fifties. Rock and roll was in vogue and I became deeply immersed in it. I enjoyed dancing, drinking, and all that goes along with that type of existence.

The Bible became an interesting book for me. I wanted to find out what made these people "tick" spiritually. I read Christian books, one in particular by Dr. Billy Graham called "Peace with God." That little book, along with the Bible, and the holiness of life lived by those teachers and a few Christian students I knew, brought me to the



realization I was as bankrupt spiritually as anyone in the world. What began as curiosity to know the basis upon which these evangelicals built their lives, was slowly turning into a hunger in the depths of my soul and spirit. I needed to know the Christ of the Bible—the living Christ, who was no longer in the tomb or on the cross, but “the One who forever liveth to make intercession for us.”

Well, I was “almost persuaded.”

The Lord, however, had reserved “one last knock-out punch” to help me acknowledge my need of Him. In Bible class I happened to sit by a young, gorgeous gal who stole my heart the minute I saw her. Her eyes were big, her smile so sweet, and two beauty marks by her lips further adorned her attractiveness. I mean everything about her was perfect to me. She radiated peace, love, and happiness. But, she had a problem; she was a very dedicated Christian. The more I found out about her commitment to Christ and her love for Him, the more I saw how wretched and ugly I was inside. She had walked with Jesus for more than ten years, and I would come to classes with the smell of cigarette smoke all over me—and many times with a terrible hangover.

Cecilia and I became very good friends. She admired my ability to get straight A's in every subject, including Bible class. We both joined the traveling choir and sang duet numbers on special occasions. Somehow she began to see “possibilities” in me, and invited me to attend church with her. She'd been raised in a Pentecostal Church, so that's where she took me as often as she could talk me into it. Of course, what could I do? I couldn't say no.

Finally God broke through my religious mask and misguided concepts and allowed the brightness of His light to shine through every dark corner of my being. I didn't like what I saw within me. I didn't run to an altar of prayer or to the front of the chapel as the evangelist had encouraged us to do after his messages. But God peeled off the scales from my eyes and made me see my need of a Savior, the only Savior, His precious Son, Jesus Christ. He not only forgave me, He saved my soul, and gave me eternal life. He brought me to the point where I knew...that I knew...that I was one of His own. “To the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the beloved” (Ephesians 1:6).

Cecilia ran from me as fast as she could—until she finally caught me. In the year 2003 we will have been married 42 years. But that's another story.



The Gang

Two back rows: Craig and Laila, Brent and Lety, Harry and Cheryl with baby Marissa. Middle: Mom, Pop and grandson Jesse.  
Bottom row: Simon III, Pauline and Erick.



Concert with "The Overholts." Ray is the author of the song "Ten Thousand Angels."

Album dedication at the Edison UMC, Edison, Ohio



Fearsome "threesome," Harry joins Mom and Dad in ministry.

## PARADISE LOST

Cecilia and I had a storybook romance. Oh, maybe not like Romeo and Juliet or like Jacob who worked 14 years for his prospective father-in-law, Laban, to win his beloved Rachel's hand in marriage. But our romance was no less exciting, though our marriage nearly failed.

LPI was an old learning institution founded in the early 1900s. Even though we had just gone through the decade of the fifties, much of the old perceptions on adolescent behavior, courtship in particular, remained unchanged. The students most affected by this view were those under their direct responsibility, namely the boarding students. Cecilia was one of those "fortunate few." Holding hands was a no-no; hugging was out of the question; and kissing was a capital crime. You were better off not knowing what the consequences of that offense would be.

Cecilia had come from Ithaca, Michigan, on a two-year scholarship to finish her high school education. Because of illness in the family and many other factors, she had been unable to finish her studies at home.

When the teachers found out Cecilia was in "grave danger" by the close physical proximity to me (we sat next to each other in class regularly) and we had been seen in deep conversations in the hallways, they became extremely alarmed and very protective.

It was rather interesting to watch the unfolding of this fascinating drama. On one hand, those teachers wanted to win me for Christ, and they went out of their way to love and help me. On the other hand, they were not convinced I had changed enough or "seen the Light" sufficiently to trust me with "one of their own." They watched Cecilia like a Mother Hen looking after her little ones. The daily surveillance was from the old dormitory to the bus and from the bus to the school in the mornings. In the afternoons the sequence would be reversed. We could not have a date even at the corner ice cream parlor. But—as it has been said in the past—where there is a will, there is a way.

Cecilia could not have had any possible "ulterior motive" when she asked permission to invite me to attend church with her on Sundays (chaperoned, of course). They could not say no. After all she was being a good "witness" to me. We still could not hold hands, but

we solved that problem. Under the pew we "held feet" undetected. That little "morsel" nourished our romantic appetite and kept it thriving through the week.

(You may not get the absurdity of all this until you realize that Cecilia was 21 years old and I was 22—in the latter half of the twentieth century, no less.)

When in war, one of the most common strategies is to infiltrate the enemy lines. We had reached that point in our undeclared war of wits. Ceci had become close friends with one of the ladies who often chaperoned the girls on their shopping expeditions. This lady was a God-sent angel to us. When Cecilia needed to "go shopping," she immediately volunteered to be her chaperone. I would be waiting at a predetermined place and join them. She then gave us stern instructions, with a wink and a smile, to meet her at that same spot at a certain hour. Believe me, we never disappointed her. The morsels were now complete meals. We window-shopped, had some real tacos across the border, and even took in a movie now and then when time permitted. We were sure there just couldn't be two people more in love than we were. The clandestine appearance of our "escapades" added excitement and a degree of intrigue to our lives.

When we finally became engaged, I bought my sweetheart perhaps the cheapest ring you could find anywhere. That's all I could afford; but the way she reacted when I put it on her finger, you'd think I had just given her the biggest diamond in the world. Oh, how she wanted to show it off to all her friends. She wanted the world to know she had found the man of her dreams. Unfortunately—she could not. Our engagement had to remain a secret until the end of the school year.

The culmination of our love brought us together at a quaint little Methodist Church in Beebe, Michigan, on August 26, 1961. Cecilia looked stunningly radiant and beautiful in her specially designed, satin wedding gown with a double train embroidered with white Spanish lace along the edges. There, in the presence of God and a multitude of friends and relatives, we pledged our love to each other. "For better or for worse...for richer or for poorer...for as long as we both should live."

None of my relatives could attend the ceremony, but my older sis-

ter, Cruz, unable to make the long trip, had the wedding gown made by a seamstress friend of hers in Mexico. She gave it to Cecilia as a special wedding gift. (Incidentally, our oldest daughter wore that same dress for her wedding. Two other relatives have worn it, as well. Forty years later it is still as fresh and beautiful as it was on our wedding day). Two very special friends from Lydia Patterson, Joel and Rachel Martinez, came all the way from El Paso. Joel was my best man and Rachel played piano. Ma and Pa Gladstone, who had been instrumental in securing the scholarship for Cecilia to attend LPL, stood as my adopted parents. These dear friends made it easier for me, so that I wouldn't feel as lonesome for my folks during such a special time in my life.

Another wonderful couple, Ma and Pa Cooley, offered us their beautiful log cabin on Bear Lake, Michigan, for our honeymoon. They just moved out and said, "It's all yours, enjoy it."

"Are we dreaming, Hon, or is it all real?" I asked Cecilia as we basked in the sunshine and warm, crystal-clear waters of Bear Lake. "I don't know," she answered. "If it is a dream, I don't want to wake up; and if it's reality I want to live it forever with you."

\*\*\*

After our honeymoon, we had to return to Mexico. My student visa had run out and there was no feasible way to continue my education.

"Sweetheart, do you think you will be able to adjust to living in Mexico for a while?" I asked Ceci. "It shouldn't take too long for me to get the resident visa we talked about before."

"Whatever it takes, Honey, I'm ready."

I felt sorry for Cecilia, having to do this. She had not been raised in luxury and comfort in the United States, but living in Mexico is an entirely different ball game. There are a lot of adjustments to be made. The water is different, food is cooked differently, and sleeping accommodations were far from ideal. There were five of us most of the time, but only two bedrooms.

A tall concrete wall surrounded the patio, for protection. But there was no real privacy when you needed to use the potty. It sat in the

middle of the patio...without much around it. I recall finding Cecilia with a white sheet over her head several times as she used the commode.

"Is that you under there, or are you a ghost?" I hollered from the kitchen.

"It isn't funny," she'd say. "If you keep teasing me like that I'm going to start bawling, and you're going to be in a heap of trouble."

These living conditions didn't bother me much, but I knew the sacrifice Cecilia was making simply because she loved me. I tried to use humor as much as I could but it didn't work all of the time.

On one occasion, in the middle of the night, she tells me: "Honey, I have to have some blueberries."

"You say what, Darling?"

"I have to have some blueberries; you have to go get me some."

"Honey, I've never seen blueberries in Mexico. I don't even know what they look like."

"Well, you'll have to go to El Paso and find me some."

You guessed it; she was pregnant with our first daughter.

\*\*\*

When we felt enough progress had been made in regard to my residence visa, I sent Cecilia back to Michigan to stay with her folks. Her pregnancy was very difficult and we thought she might feel better in more familiar surroundings. We were confident it would not be too long before I could join her. To our dismay, she had to be hospitalized shortly after her arrival.

In God's providence and mercy, I received my visa in December just a few days after I had sent Cecilia home.

When I arrived at the Greyhound station in Ithaca, my father-in-law was waiting and immediately drove me to the hospital. Needless to say, it was good to see my darling wife except for the circumstances we were under.

What a way to start life in these United States, one might say. I had not one penny to my name, no job, a wife in the hospital, and no home of our own where I could take her. My, my, my! But we must start somewhere, and when you start at the bottom, there is only one way you can go. That is up!

My in-laws were most gracious in helping solve some of my most immediate problems. They wouldn't let us starve or freeze to death in the Michigan winter weather. I helped Dad do chores around the house and in his shoe-repair shop. I shoveled enough snow that first year in the U. S. to last me a lifetime. Winters in the Midwest seemed harsher and longer back then. Both Ceci and I did our best to be helpful and in different ways tried not to be too much of a burden for her folks.

As tulips and daffodils slowly began to open the doors of a new spring season, faith and hope in our hearts sprang up, as well. The Wolverine Shoe Company, makers of world famous "Hush Puppy Shoes," gave me a job at their plant in Ithaca. I started making minimum wages with the possibility of earning more in their piecework program. They also provided excellent health insurance coverage and a profit-sharing plan. The spring of '62 marked the beginning of married life...on our own.

We moved out of my in-laws' home and rented a tiny apartment just big enough and cozy enough for the "three" of us. We were now ready to enjoy the bliss, peace, and harmony we had envisioned for our marriage. Our apartment, small as it was, represented a miniature Eden paradise where God would walk with us in the cool of the day and provide all we would need for our comfort and well-being. What could possibly disturb our peace and quiet now? We were on our own to love each other, to know each other, and to grow together. For a number of months our Eden paradise was truly all we had dreamed about. We were both Christians, active in church, working hard, and preparing for our baby's arrival. Why did we wait so long to get married?

Now, the loving and learning to know each other parts were going great, but the "growing together" was becoming a bit turbulent. Alone now, we didn't have to whisper when we disagreed. Nor did we spare each other's feelings much anymore. "Little foxes" were sneaking into our garden and threatened to spoil the vines just starting to flourish. We soon noticed our differences in personality, our character flaws, cultural backgrounds, and habits, etc. Definitely, there was trouble brewing in paradise.

Cecilia and I are both of Mexican descent but brought up in differ-

ent cultures. She was born in San Antonio, Texas, and raised in Michigan. I was born and educated in Old Mexico. At my earliest opportunity, I made it perfectly clear to her that we should understand each other from the start.

I said to her, "Honey, look, I don't know a whole lot about the Bible yet, but I've read enough to know that God said the husband is the boss in the family and that you, the wife, are supposed to obey me. So, if I merely gesture for you to do something for me, I want you to do it *pronto* (Like, right now). That's also the Mexican way, you should know."

She was quick to remind me, however, in a most emphatic way, "Are you forgetting we are not living in Mexico now and that things are done quite differently here? I know more Bible than you do and the Bible says we are supposed to submit to each other in the fear of God. So, if I answer your gesture with one of my own, that means 'no way, Jose.' I'm not doing whatever it is you want me to do."

I don't think we were doing a lot of "growing together."

I protected my *macho* image at the expense of the peace and tranquility in our home. Cecilia, being the oldest in her family, had learned a great deal about responsibility while I knew absolutely nothing about how to run a home or how to be responsible with our finances. I was the baby in my family. Everybody did whatever I wanted. Now she wants to tell me how to spend "my" money? I was not ready to share my "authority" with her. She was too much of a threat to my "manhood."

Well, the "little foxes" were now full grown. They were spoiling everything in sight—vines, flowers, and whatever little fruit we had managed to produce. The things the foxes didn't spoil, we destroyed with reckless abandon. Our paradise was in shambles and we were losing the desire to cultivate and care for it. Our paradise, slowly but surely, was becoming a desert incapable of sustaining life. The foxes had taken over.

Two precious things held our marriage together. One was our commitment to God or perhaps more accurately, God's commitment to us. Heaven knows we had failed Him miserably! Had He visited our garden in the cool of the day? Had He come often? Had He called us by our name and we had not been listening? Or did we even expect

Him to be involved in our lives? Was He interested at all, even now, to help us pick up the pieces? Can paradise be found? Can it be restored? The other thing that held our fragile marriage together was the love we had now for our "two" little girls, Laila and Pauline. We could not bear the thought of seeing them grow up in a broken home. I must admit that while I was looking for ways to cope with our situation, Cecilia was busy looking for ways to solve our problems.

Would there be yet another spring in our lives together? Would we see flowers growing again in our barren garden? Were the foxes permanent guests in our lives? Was paradise really lost?

Read on, Pilgrim.



Maria Ciuiz, one special person, my sister.



Stealing the show. Laila and Pauline.



Give Me That Old Time Religion...



Parents' night at football game. Pauline: band member and cheerleader.



Son-in-law Craig Zenil and oldest daughter Laila.

## PARADISE FOUND

I came home from work one day and found Cecilia waiting by the door. She practically snatched the car keys out of my hands as she flew past me.

"I'll be back," she said, trying to restrain the flood of tears welling up in her eyes.

"Fine," I muttered, not sure she heard me.

She was gone for several hours but finally returned late in the afternoon. She seemed calm and even gave me what looked like a sheepish little smile.

"Are the girls OK?" she wanted to know.

"Yea, they've been pretty good, no major problems."

"I'll make us some supper. You guys must be starving."

I didn't know what to say, and I didn't want to rock the boat by asking where she'd been.

Little changes soon took place. The house began to sparkle and shine again. The dishes got done immediately after each meal; our clothes were washed and ironed, and the girls bathed each evening. It was obvious something drastic had happened to Cecilia that afternoon.

As time went by, my curiosity got the best of me. I had to ask, "Honey, what's happened to you? You are different. I am not complaining or wanting to start an argument, but will you please tell me what happened that afternoon you left the house in such a hurry? The house is different and our relationship has improved remarkably—through no effort on my part. I must admit. Can you tell me what happened?"

"Well," she said reluctantly, "I didn't want to share it with you that day because I was afraid you might take it the wrong way; but if you really want to know, I'll tell you."

"I promise not to be offended or upset," I reassured her. "In fact, I need to make some changes in my own life." I couldn't believe I was actually saying those things to her, but I meant every word.

"I, uh," she began:

I came to the sobering realization we could not continue to live together the way we were going. What had become a

power struggle between us, coupled with the myriad of obstacles in communicating with each other, paled in comparison with the sense of frustration that was crippling me emotionally and spiritually. All our problems, I concluded, were rooted in the fact that the dreams, goals, and aspirations I had nourished throughout my young life were now completely shattered. I had lived in migrant camps as a child, traveled across the country from southern Texas to northern Michigan in covered trucks, and worked endlessly doing farm work from sunup to sundown. Now, here I stood in our small living-dining room, looking down on my two little girls playing on a dirty old hardwood floor.

Suddenly reality struck me like a bolt of lightning. It brought me out of what seemed like a long, long coma. What am I doing here in this condition? It wasn't supposed to turn out like this; what had happened? I was going to marry a school teacher, have a lovely home of my own, and buy my own clothes. I didn't want to wear 'leftover' clothes from the church rummage sale anymore. Nobody was going to embarrass me again by saying, 'Oh, that's the old dress I gave to the church sale.' Things were going to be different for me.

Yet, there was my sink full of dirty dishes, diapers on the back porch had been in water for days, dirty sheets on the bed hadn't been changed for a while...and...and...church attendance was no longer part of our lives for months.

As my daughters played on, oblivious to the storm raging in their Mommy's heart, I knew I had to do something! They deserved better than they were getting.

Cecilia glanced up at me several times as she related these things weighing so heavily on her heart. Pausing for a moment, she wanted to know if she should continue.

"By all means, Honey, I am beginning to appreciate you more and at the same time I am feeling really sorry I haven't been more understanding and helpful in our marriage. But please go on."

Well, she continued, as I said before, we hadn't been to church for a long time but I was certain God had not abandoned us. I knew where the answers could be found. So I called the pastor's wife from the church we had last attended.

I said, 'Sister Smith, I need help.' That's about all I could utter without bursting into tears over the telephone.

To my surprise and amazement I heard her say, 'Well now, you live out in the country by North Star, don't you? That's a bit far. But I'll tell you what; if we get out your way we'll be sure to stop and...' Wham! I slammed down the phone in anger and frustration.

I was ready to give up, shuck it all, abandon ship, sound retreat, and turn out the lights. But I couldn't, and I wouldn't, and I didn't.

I was convinced that Sister Smith had not intended to be insensitive or uncaring. I knew she loved us dearly, but my emotions were raw and my response to circumstances was unpredictable at best during that time. In retrospect, I believe the Lord allowed me to reach this point in my life to see if I were really ready to receive His help.

As I sat there by the phone, heartbroken and confused, my school Bible Club sponsor, Mrs. Marion Bush, came to mind. I decided to give her a call.

'Sister Bush,' I said, 'this is Cecilia Sanchez (Cecilia's maiden name). I don't know if you remember me.'

'Of course I remember you,' she interrupted in her usual sweet tone of voice I recalled so well.

'I need help.'

She didn't ask any questions about my problem. She simply said, 'Do you want to come over or should I go to your house?' Her words were soothing and refreshing like drops of rain on a hot summer day. 'We need to do this now, Cecilia,' she said in earnest.

'Now?'

That's when you walked in and I grabbed the keys from your hands.

"Well, tell me more, what happened next?" I was anxious to hear the whole story.

As I opened the parsonage door, the rich aroma of home cooking permeated the entire house. There was the wonderful fragrance of bread baking in the oven. The house was spotless.

Sister Bush led me to a small, cozy sitting room.

No sooner had I sat down, than I began to pour out my heart. I told her everything about my shattered dreams, my dirty house, and my turbulent relationship with you. I left nothing out.

When I finished, I must have looked like a wet rag doll totally soaked in my own tears. Sister Bush gently took my hands and said, 'Cecilia, you know where the answer is.'

I fell on my knees as Sister Bush knelt by my side. I confessed to God all my troubles, my disappointments, laziness, selfishness, and self-pity. I just told Him everything. I was aware of the fact that He knew it all...but it was good 'to cast all my cares upon Him, for I knew that He cared for me.' I cried a lot, but they were cleansing tears.

When I stood up, Sister Bush took both of my hands into hers, looked me in the eye and said, 'Cecilia, you know what you must do now, don't you?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Clean house, cook for my family...'

'And what else?'

'Oh yes, start my family back to church.'

'That's right; and remember, I will be here for you if you need me.'

When I left the Bush home I felt clean, free, with renewed purpose in my heart. 'Yes, my family must come first,' I whispered to myself.

As I drove home I still felt the overwhelming presence of God all around me. So I prayed, 'Lord, I give You all my dreams. I don't need them anymore. I have new dreams. I am going to be the best mother and wife I can possibly be. Someday my children will be proud to call me Mom. Thank You, Jesus, for giving me a new beginning.'

So, Mr. Avila, you are stuck with me, whether you like it or not, 'til death do us part.'

I was speechless. I had always known the strength of character and depth of wisdom Cecilia possessed. This time, however, you could have knocked me over with a feather. My *macho* mentality had just been dealt a devastating blow.

When she finished explaining the things that took place that eventful day, she just scurried off to do her house work and left me standing there—pondering what I had just heard and beholding the transformation all around me.

\*\*\*

As time went on, I noticed spring flowers starting to blossom in the garden of our lives. Love was beginning to enliven the wilted plants that lay scattered in the parched soil of neglect and selfishness. There was hope for us now. Paradise must be reclaimed.

Cecilia had gotten our marriage started on the path of victory through surrender. Our old strategies of temper tantrums, intimidation, and all other sorts of psychological mind games were now useless. She just wouldn't fight back like she did before. She had allowed God back into our lives and it seemed as though He was taking sides...her side.

Now, I had known God well enough to realize that *when He begins to do a work in us, He will not stop until He gets the job done* (That's my own paraphrase of Philippians 1:6). What a glorious truth this proved to be. His great work of restoration had just begun in our lives.

\*\*\*

A series of revival meetings was in progress at the old Pilgrim Holiness Church in Chesanning, Michigan—some 30 miles from our house. Cecilia and I decided to attend one evening, even though it was not the denomination with which we were affiliated. We knew the pastor and several members of that small rural church, and they made us feel quite welcome.

I could not help staring at the evangelist seated on the platform awaiting his turn to bring the evening message. He was tall and handsomely rugged in appearance. His beard was down to his chest, but he had no hair on his upper lip. He looked to me much like an Old Testament prophet—very serious, pleasant, and extremely dignified.

'I think he's Amish,' Cecilia whispered to me.

'Oh, what does that mean?'

'Well, you know the Mennonites that live in our area. They are 'modern' Amish folks. Which really means that Mennonites like new stuff, such as cars and electric things. The Amish enjoy driving horse-drawn buggies and use lanterns and kerosene lamps to light their homes at night.' It was Cecilia's simplest explanation without going into all the doctrinal details that separate the two groups.



I got the point, but I couldn't help teasing my wife. "How long did it take him to get here from Indiana?" I asked her.

"Just shush up and listen to the message."

Rev. Stutzman was a different kind of preacher than I was used to hearing in revival meetings.

He didn't shout. He didn't jump. He just brought his message in a low monotone voice that made it somewhat difficult for me to concentrate. Cecilia, on the other hand, was totally absorbed by the sermon and seemed oblivious to the world around her. Usually she would be fidgety and bored under such ministry because of her Pentecostal upbringing. However, she didn't even notice that the service had gone on for quite a long time.

When the meeting was over, I thought Cecilia would be anxious to go home. Instead, she wanted to go over to the parsonage and hear the man talk some more.

"This man has something I need," she told me.

"OK, Hon, whatever it takes."

At the parsonage, with his Bible open Brother Stutzman expounded further regarding the Person, the power, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Cecilia ate every heavenly morsel, every word that fell from this dear brother's lips. She was so hungry to know more of God and feed endlessly at His table. Of course, God was only too willing to provide the delicacies from His inexhaustible storehouse.

Brother Stutzman's delight seemed to be the privilege to serve such a succulent meal.

I didn't know if anyone was keeping track of time, but somewhere along the line they finally concluded the evening activities. But not before I heard Cecilia ask Brother Stutzman if he would consider coming to our house for a few days on a later date at his convenience. "We need to hear more about this," she explained.

I thought, we? What do you mean, we? Sweetheart, you're the one with the problems. I know all about being saved and all about the Holy Ghost. Just ask me. Well, I believe the Lord must've sealed my mouth shut so I wouldn't voice what I was thinking. I am glad.

Several weeks later our precious brother did honor us with his presence in our home for a period of three days. This was not unusual

for him to do as part of his *modus operandi* based on Acts 20:20 (the Christian's 20-20 vision), which reads: "And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you and have taught you publicly, and from house to house...."

Each morning as I went to work, I would leave them researching the Scriptures at the kitchen table. I don't know if they ate any lunch or not, but when I returned home, they were still sitting where I left them. Brother Stutzman was truly a man of God. He was anointed, knowledgeable, and wise in things of the Spirit. He helped my darling wife overcome deep-seated bitterness, resentments, old wounds that wouldn't heal, and hurts that festered her life continuously. One major obstacle she needed to hurdle was the indelible memory of the poor witness many members of her father's church had shown during her adolescent years. "If this is what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit, I don't really want anything to do with that in my Christian experience," she reasoned.

Major surgery was needed in Cecilia's soul and spirit, and Brother Stutzman had brought along the Divine Physician. Our old kitchen table became God's operating table. His soothing love and tender mercy were the anesthetic that helped her through the painful ordeal of dealing with her past.

On the third day of his visit, our beloved guest said to my wife, "Cecilia, Jesus wants to do something very special for you. Shall we retire to the living room to wait on Him in a time of prayer?"

Our prayer that night was one of thanksgiving and praise to our heavenly Father for His redeeming love and for His manifest presence all around us. Brother Stutzman invited Bob Cromwell, a dear friend visiting us that evening, and me to gather around Cecilia as she knelt in the middle of the living room with her hands lifted toward heaven. He instructed us to place our hands on her head as he led in a most beautiful prayer of surrender to the Lordship of Jesus and His precious Holy Spirit. While he prayed, Cecilia's countenance radiated with irrepressible joy and a boundless love the Holy Spirit poured into her being. "It was joy unspeakable and full of glory," literally.

Of course, the surgery was a resounding success. Her post-op results were a super abundance of love, joy, peace, forgiveness, and a

freedom she had never known.

As we related this glorious experience to many of our friends with the Holiness Movement, they were convinced Cecilia had experienced what is known as entire sanctification. "Yes sir," they assured me, "she was sanctified holy." Our Baptist brothers viewed this as an experience of total surrender to the lordship of Christ and the Holy Spirit. But our Pentecostal friends were just as convinced that this was what the Bible called the baptism in the Holy Ghost. Curiously enough, at that time of trouble and turmoil in our lives, neither Cecilia nor I really cared what the theological name was for what happened. All we knew was that God loved us and wanted to be personally involved in our individual lives and marriage.

I must regretfully admit that even up to this time, I blamed Cecilia for most of our difficulties. She expected and demanded more of me than I was capable of delivering. This in turn, brought upon us the feelings of frustration and helplessness in our relationship that she explained earlier. When she began to search for solutions to our problems, I thought, she needs to do that. I am OK. I'll help her find what she needs. When God brought Brother Stutzman into our lives I was the happiest man on earth. I rejoiced as I watched her enter into a deeper relationship with God. I thought, This is great, this is wonderful.

"Brother Bob," I heard Brother Stutzman say. "Let us lay hands on Simon now, shall we?"

Now, I wasn't expecting this. But I didn't resist as they approached and began to pray over me as they had done over my wife. Trying to be submissive and cooperative, I prayed along with them with my eyes closed. It wasn't very long though before I looked up at Brother Stutzman and told him, "You are one of the most gentle and godly men I have ever known. You would be the last person I'd ever want to offend, but I'm OK. I believe God gave me all He was going to give me when I got saved. I received everything by faith. Do you know what I am saying?" I was pleading with him to understand me.

"O my dear Brother Simon, you will never be able to offend me no matter how hard you might try," he said in his usual sweet soft-spoken manner. "More important than my understanding you, is the fact that God understands exactly where you are. He will continue re-

vealing Himself to you at your own pace simply because He loves you and your precious family. If you're OK, I'm OK, too," was his reassuring comment.

In the weeks and months following Cecilia's mountaintop experience, I embarked on a self-imposed spying mission, born out of child-like curiosity to "watch and see" the spiritual metamorphosis she was going through. Not that I was having doubts about my own convictions in regard to the Holy Spirit's work in the life of a follower of Christ, I was just curious. I wanted to see the difference between the "before and after" Cecilia, and I found that the changes were drastic and wonderful. I had never doubted her love for me for one moment, but it seemed as though that love had multiplied many times over, not just for me but also for life in general and everyone around her.

Well, what could I say? My curiosity was gradually turning into a hunger to "personally" know God in the dimension Cecilia had discovered. My dubious spying mission had led into an intense scriptural fact-finding study that I hoped would satisfy and dispel my curiosity. Up to this point I was ignorant of the meaning of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:6: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."

God in His mercy met me at my point of need one glorious evening. The spirit of prayer settled in a most sublime and tender manner all over my soul. My bedroom became the Tabernacle where the shekinah glory of God shone all around. From my knees I went to a prostrated position before His awesome presence. His love, His peace and His joy overflowed like "rivers of living water" from my innermost being (John 7: 38).

\*\*\*

"Simon, Simon, where art thou?"

"Ceci and I are watering the garden. It's looking great again this year, Lord."

"Are there anymore 'little foxes' around?"

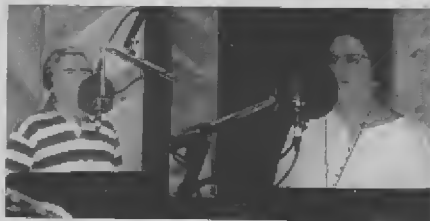
"Well, yes, but they are helping us now and we have developed a 'population control' system. We are the bosses now, *Abba (Daddy)*. Thanks for Your help."



Our young pianist Danny Lacy  
before going overseas as missionary.



Video taping in Ottawa, Canada  
with guest speaker Rex Humbar  
on the Bill plankart program.



Album recording at QCA, Cincinnati.

## THE CALL

"Honey, guess what, I just handed in my quitting notice at the shop," I told Cecilia over the telephone.

"You say what?" she replied, trying to keep our two little girls quiet in the background.

"We are now in full-time ministry. I just handed in my quitting notice at the shop," I repeated, hoping to sound brave and excited.

"Well," she said after a short pause, "I believe it is the right time."

Cecilia and I had discussed the idea of dedicating our lives fully to the service of our Lord in a ministry of music. But common sense and circumstances had held us back from making this all-important, life-changing decision. How could we even dare think we could just leave the security of a steady job, our medical insurance coverage, and our profit-sharing plan at the factory? Besides, we didn't have an organization backing us, had no formal music training, and had never attended Bible college or seminary. As a matter-of-fact, as we think back thirty-plus years later, this was one of the most foolish decisions a young couple like us could make at that particular time in our lives. But then again...we are so glad for the life of faith we have lived, for the friendships we've made, and for the millions of lives we have touched through our music.

Now, making Hush Puppies shoes wasn't the most lucrative job in the world; but as our people in Mexico are prone to say, "It put *frijoles* (beans) and tortillas on our table, clothes on our backs, and a roof over our heads." I enjoyed my work. I enjoyed the people I worked with, and I enjoyed being a witness for Jesus during those seven years in Ithaca, Michigan.

So, when Cecilia heard me say over the telephone that we were now "in full-time ministry," she wasn't really shocked. We were ready to launch out into the unknown—not knowing what God had in store for our children and us. All we knew was that we were willing to say, "We're not much, Lord, but we're all Yours."

I'd like to say that we were not scared, that we were really bold and daring when we took our first step in a life of faith. But if the truth be known, the words of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 2:3 aptly describe our state of mind at that time: "And I was with you in

weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling."

NOT MANY WISE, MIGHTY,  
OR NOBLE ARE CALLED

The last three-and-a-half years I worked at that shoe factory. I sang Gospel songs at our local church at the request of our pastor, the Reverend Earl Van Sipe. His initial approach was, "Brother Simon, you really have a good voice (he meant loud), how about singing a solo next Sunday?"

"Pastor," I answered, "I can't read notes, but I love to sing. If the pianist can follow me, I'd be happy to oblige. I just sing the way I feel the message of the song."

"No problem," he assured me. "My wife will play for you. If you go too fast, she'll catch up with you and if you slow down, she'll wait for you." This is how our ministry began.

I must say there was not the slightest hint then that I would ever entertain the thought of full-time ministry in music. My wife, however, saw something much different through her spiritual eyes.

We attended a concert at the First Church of God in Alma, Michigan that featured the talented singer Doug Oldham, accompanied by young Bill Gaither at the piano. It was at that concert that God put a vision on Cecilia's heart that one day He would be using me in a similar ministry. Little did she know she was seeing only half of the picture. She was the other half.

Cecilia joined me eventually as different churches began calling us to sing for their revival meetings. We weren't fancy; we didn't know how to be fancy. We just sang straight from the heart, and people must have liked it because they kept inviting us back. Soon our schedule began to fill. We were in church about every night of the week and were travelling farther and farther away. We didn't charge any fee for our singing; maybe that's why they kept calling us. But they always took a love offering, which covered our travel expenses and a small salary for a young pianist who helped us during those early days.

Many people who have heard us sing often comment: "It is so

nice to watch you two hold hands when you sing; you seem to be so in love with each other." Actually, yes, my wife and I love each other a whole lot, and we love to hold hands. But when we began our ministry, we held hands because we were seared to death. We literally "held each other up." At times I think God didn't really call us into this ministry. He more or less pushed us into it to play a trick on (confound) "the wise, the mighty, and the noble."

DEPENDENT ON HIM

In our musical repertoire we included songs and choruses such as "Prayer Is The Key To Heaven (But faith unlocks the door)," and "Faith In God Can Move A Mighty Mountain." All of them emphasized the walk of faith believers are to follow. So, now in our new lifestyle it became a matter of "Live what you preach, Simon; does it really work?"

The Apostle Peter had walked on water for a short distance (Matthew 14:29-31), until his faith wavered and he began to sink. He promptly cried out to Jesus, "Lord, save me." Immediately Jesus stretched forth His hand and brought him to the safety of the ship. The story plainly illustrates the importance of sustained faith for Peter's predicament. In our case, however, there was no ship waiting. We were to live in the water with a faith no stronger than Peter's. The times when we have doubted, when we have miserably faltered in our faith, we have cried out louder than Peter ever did, "Lord, save us." And, yes, He was always there to keep us from sinking. But then He says, "Just keep on walking, even when there is no rescue ship. This is your life; but be not afraid. I'm watching over you through the calm or through the storm. I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Does it work? You have His personal guarantee and our proof of walking on the water, depending on Him every step we took for over thirty years.

On one occasion a friend of ours, Evangelist Luz Gonzalez, challenged me to join his organization and reach out to our Spanish-speaking people with the Gospel of Christ. "Simon," he said, "the sky is the limit for us; we can make an impact for the Lord throughout Latin America. Will you join me? We will draw equal salaries from our

evangelistic association, and I am convinced God will honor our efforts. What do you say?"

Brother Luz is a tremendously gifted evangelist, a motivator, and an excellent fundraiser. Our association thrived under his leadership. Many churches readily responded to his pleas for support, and finances always abounded to carry out the ministry and draw our salaries in a consistent business-like manner.

One day, out of the blue, my oldest daughter, Laila, a teen-ager by this time, rocked the little comfortable "ship" I had found for myself. I was counting on Brother Luz's faith and natural abilities to lead our organization. She needed a new dress for some school function and we just couldn't afford it at the time. In utter consternation and frightening honesty she declared to her Mom: "I just don't like Daddy drawing a fixed salary. I liked it better when we lived by faith and had to pray in everything we needed. But now, if we need something and we can't afford it, we just don't get it; that's no fair!" She was emphatic, to say the least.

"Wow!" I didn't think my daughter could define faith by quoting Hebrews 11:1, but she had understood the basics of living in the water with no safety "ship"—only Jesus watching over us.

After two years of successful ministry with Brother Luz, Cecilia and I went back to working on our own. In 1978 we founded Latin American Ministries Inc., which operates on the same basis as its founders. It is always on the water depending on God. We have on occasion worked with Brother Luz and still appreciate his friendship as well as the work he continues to do throughout Latin America.

#### DEFINING THE CALL

Not long after we began to sing, the sobering realization dawned on our hearts and minds that singing was not the real call God had placed on our lives. Singing was to be a means to an end, a precious tool for taking the Good News of His love to the ends of the earth. What an awesome discovery, and what a humbling responsibility.

Whether it is in a citywide evangelistic crusade somewhere in Guatemala, or at a concert in some small church in the boonies, I pray...I meditate...I pace the floor. In short, I am a basket case before

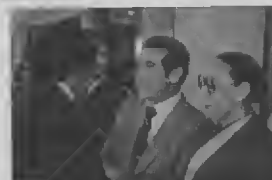
each service. I want every song we sing to count, I want the message of every song to speak to a lost soul in our audience. I want our songs to encourage, strengthen, and inspire any believer needing ministry from our Lord. Now, some people may call those agonizing moments before each performance an "extreme case of nerves," while others will call it "intensity." I'll settle for "nervous intensity." It is, nevertheless, an exhilarating feeling; it is a true sacrifice of praise from our hearts. It is His strength being made perfect in our weakness.

It isn't our call; it is His calling.



Ministry in Guatemala.

Meeting Gen. Efraim Rios Mont, President of Guatemala and First Lady Doña Teresa, during 1982 crusade in Guatemala City.



People being saved in Arcelia, Mexico. Our organization donated funds for floor and roof of this building.



Preaching the gospel in Matamoros, Mexico.



Hurricane victims in Acapulco, Mexico. Our friends helped restore their home and some furnishings.



Orphans at "Mi Hogar."

## IN HIS PRESENCE

How awesome it is to bask in the manifest presence of God, to enjoy times of refreshing, renewal, comfort, and assurance.

Cecilia and I were living in Midland, Michigan, when we received advertising material from our good friend Lou Gerald, coordinator and promoter of the Bill Gaither Trio concerts in our area. A big concert was to be held at the Central Michigan University Warner Auditorium, featuring the Gaithers, the Slaughters and soloist Doug Oldham.

These singers had been the cream of the crop in Gospel music for many years. Not only had they been some of the most talented singers, but also some of the most prolific songwriters in recent history. Many of Bill and Gloria Gaither's songs have become classics and will be sung for generations to come. Doug and the Slaughters have also written beautiful songs used in many churches and concert halls around the country.

Of course, tickets to the concert were at a premium. We had to get ours weeks in advance. This was our first time to an event of this magnitude and we were anxious to hear these giants in the Gospel music field. We wanted to watch, hear, and learn all we possibly could from the "masters" in presenting the Gospel effectively through music. We were indeed fortunate to secure our tickets, and could hardly wait to be there.

\*\*\*

The place was packed to capacity. You could not put one more person in that building—big as it was. As we elbowed our way through the crowd we ran into many friends we had sung with in churches and school auditoriums throughout the state of Michigan. We all shared the same sense of expectancy. The atmosphere was charged with excitement and a consciousness in our spirit that we were in for a great blessing that night.

The moment had arrived. The master of ceremonies welcomed those in attendance. Then he proceeded to introduce a local pastor to open the program with prayer and dedicate the evening activities to

the One in whose name we had gathered to worship and exalt.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, the moment we've all been waiting for," the M. C. enthusiastically proclaimed over the public address system. "Please give a great Central Michigan welcome to the...." His words were literally drowned out by thunderous applause mixed with the shouts of "Amen, Alleluia, and Praise the Lord."

What a moment it was!

The inimitable harmony of the Bill Gaither Trio (Bill, Gloria, and Danny), their unique style, humor, and unquestionable spirituality "brought the glory down," as some people often say. One moment they had us laughing so hard my stomach ached; the next moment we would be lifting our hands toward heaven in praise and adoration to God. And still another moment their personal stories and biblical accounts had us crying all over the place.

The Slaughters (Henry and Hazel) did likewise. Henry delighted the audience with his personal renditions of old hymns at the piano, done in classical, Southern Gospel, soul, and rock styles. What a blast! Then he and Hazel blended their rich voices in such a beautiful way that Ceci and I just looked at each other—green with envy—and managed to gasp, "Wow!" Then Hazel, with that deep alto voice brought us to a new realization of our calling in Christ with her song, "Looking Through His Eyes." My, my, how much more could we stand?

Now it was Doug's turn. The big, warm and fuzzy Teddy Bear, Doug Oldham, with his incomparable style and silky smooth voice blessed us with, "Thanks To Calvary I Don't Live Here Anymore" and many others of his signature songs. His sweet spirit and ever-present smile just lift you into the very presence of that Special One he sings about. Seeing that big hunk of a man (he weighs a little more than I do) choke in tears of emotion, you can't help but shed tears of your own—cleansing, happy tears.

Warner Auditorium had been transformed into a Tabernacle where the presence and glory of God flowed in billows of blessing, worship, and praise. Even those in attendance from traditional, staid congregations timidly raised their hands almost as high as their shoulders. Others who were used to a more demonstrative type of worship gave full sway to their being as they worshipped the same God, Cre-

ator of all, and Lover of all who worship Him in Spirit and in truth.

Time stood still. We had been there for a long while, but it was now intermission time and nobody wanted to stop. We wanted it to go on and on. Soon, however, we realized the wisdom of intermissions, as nature subtly reminded us of the necessity to take a break.

In the foyer and hallways we kept running into many friends to whom we had ministered throughout Central Michigan. It was so good to be there and together enjoy an evening of such tremendous blessing.

Then...suddenly...from somewhere, I heard a voice calling my name. "Simon," this friend shouted, "Lou Gerald is looking for you." Then he turned and shouted in the other direction, "Hey, Lou, Simon and Cecilia are over here."

Lou, nearly out of breath, elbowed his way to where we stood. "Simon, a lot of people are asking if you and Cecilia could possibly sing a song after intermission; I checked with Bill and he said that would be just fine. Will you do it?"

"Calm down, Lou," I suggested. "Let me hear you say that again. I don't think I heard what I just heard."

"Will you guys sing a song after intermission? I need to know right away," he urged.

"Well, uh, uh, I guess we could," I heard myself say.

Cecilia got so shook up and nervous at the news, she began coughing uncontrollably.

"I just can't do it," she said. "You'll have to sing solo; I've got a cough, I can't sing."

"But Honey, you haven't had a cough in months, it's just nerves." I told her, "You'll be just fine."

"Well, uh, a cough is still a cough, and I just can't do it," she said firmly.

There was no time to try to convince her, so I rushed to find Maria Pickering, our pianist at that time. I was hoping her reaction to the news would be more favorable than Cecilia's.

When I finally located her, her first question was, "What are you going to sing, Simon?"

"I have no idea, Maria; let's go backstage and pray. OK?" (To be truthful, I was just as nervous as she and Cecilia were).

Backstage, I paced back and forth and prayed a Peter's kind of prayer, "Lord, save me, I am sinking."

Every little while Marla would ask, "Have you got it yet, Simon?"

"No, just keep on praying," I would answer.

Cecilia made her way backstage and echoed Marla's question, "Have you got it yet, Simon?"

"Not yet, Hon." was my nervous response. Time was running out and a decision had to be made, like *pronto*, (right away). "It would be a lot easier to decide if you would sing with me," I haltingly added, hoping she'd feel sorry for me and give in. It worked!

"Uh...what will we sing if I join you?"

"Ceci, look, these people are real singers; they are the best there is. We can't even dare think we can somehow impress them musically or otherwise," I continued. "Why don't we just go out there and sing 'The Old Rugged Cross'—a verse in Spanish and a verse in English; what do you say? Let's just be ourselves, do our best and let God do whatever He wants to do," I pleaded, knowing she was "almost" convinced.

"All right," she finally said. Her voice was firm and her cough had miraculously ceased.

Marla was glad we had finally made a decision. A beautiful teenager and the daughter of a pastor friend, she was an extremely talented musician. Most of all, she was a remarkable, dedicated Christian. If she was as nervous as Cecilia and I were that night, she concealed it much better than we did.

\*\*\*

After intermission the Gaithers, the Slaughters, and Doug gathered around the grand piano on the stage in sort of an informal setting. It was like being home enjoying an evening with Christian friends. They strung a medley of favorite choruses and songs together, laughed, and poked fun at each other. Everyone was just having a ball.

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, backstage, our knees had quit knocking, now they were missing each other. Our nerves were getting the best of us the longer we waited.

\*\*\*

Finally we heard Doug introducing us to the huge audience. "We have some special guests here tonight," he was saying, "and they are coming to this stage to sing for you. Will you make welcome Michigan's own, The Singing Avilas!"

The lights were hot and brighter than we had ever experienced. Cecilia's cough was gone; we felt strong and confident now. God was answering our prayer. As Marla played the introduction, a most holy hush fell over the audience. We began to sing... "En el Monte Caivario estaba una cruz, emblema de afrenta y dolor..." Nobody moved. It seemed as though they all understood the Spanish lyrics and were transfixed. The whole concert had been a joyous, refreshing, and invigorating downpour from the presence of the Lord. But what He was doing with this song through the anointing of His Spirit, was far beyond anything Cecilia, Marla, or I could do on our own. Everyone was being bathed in the glory of His presence. By the time we sang the last chorus, people were humming and singing, unsolicited. "So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, Till my trophies at last I lay down. I will cling to the old rugged cross, And exchange it someday for a crown."

I cannot recall if anyone clapped or not when we finished singing, but we made our way backstage knowing heaven had come down and glory had filled our souls. Humanly speaking, though, we were relieved it was over. We needed God to rewire us for higher voltage or we might explode...in His presence.

"Simon, Cecilia, come back," we heard Doug calling. "Sing another song, will you?"

There was no time for panic and indecision now. I turned to Marla and said, "Let's sing I Am Free" (a Gaither composition). While she began to play, a scene I had witnessed many times in the past few months came to mind. I thought it would be appropriate to relate that story to introduce the song we had chosen. I told the audience how privileged we had been to share the Gospel at the Jackson, Michigan,



federal penitentiary and how without fail, we would find Brother Wyche leading a group of Christian inmates in singing "What A Friend We Have In Jesus." I said, "Brother Bill Gaither must have been thinking about people like Brother Wyche when he wrote the song 'I Am Free'." Brother Wyche and his friends may be behind steel bars and prison walls, but in their spirits they possess a greater freedom than most people outside Jackson prison who are bound by sin."

God continued to move in might and power by His Spirit through the music and lyrics of "I Am Free."

After we finished, Bill sat at the piano gently stroking the ivories, as if to gather his thoughts, and not miss the leading of the Holy Spirit.

"I would like you to join me in singing the song 'He Touched Me' (a Gaither all-time favorite)," he said. "But before we do, I want every pastor, Sunday schoolteacher, and altar worker to come and stand in front of this platform. Simon, I want you to come also. If I were going to be saved here tonight, I'd want Simon to pray for me. Wouldn't you?"

Bill was paying me the highest compliment and honor he could possibly bestow on another brother in Christ.

Warner Auditorium became a maternity ward that evening, where many souls were born into God's Kingdom. It also became an infirmary where the broken, the wounded, and the oppressed found comfort, freedom, and hope.

How truly awesome it is to bask in God's presence; "It is joy unspeakable and full of glory."

\*\*\*

Many years later, Cecilia and I ran into Danny Gaither at the Top N Sound music store in Alexandria, Indiana. We were pleasantly surprised to learn that he remembered us by name. He greeted us with: "Simon, Cecilia...Mt Pleasant, Michigan.... 'The Old Rugged Cross,' brought the house down. We've often retold the story around the country," he informed us.

## UNTO THE LEAST OF THESE

Guatemala had become like a second home country to us. We loved its rugged beauty, its rich Mayan heritage, and most of all, its wonderful people. It seemed as though if we were not home in the United States you could always find us in Guatemala sharing the Gospel in some church, soccer stadium, or open-air meeting. Benjamin Orozco, crusade coordinator for the Luis Palau Evangelistic Association, kept inviting us back year after year. Our dear friend and brother David Beam, working under Missionary Ventures, was also instrumental in keeping us busy, feeding us, and lodging us numerous times.

We always have considered evangelism to be the primary calling in our lives, but our involvement in other areas of ministry has lent much validity and credibility to our work. On one occasion, in a conversation with missionaries Dr. and Mrs. Henry Dumas, Cecilia mentioned our interest in visiting some orphanage nearby, if at all possible.

"Well, as a matter-of-fact," Novell (Mrs. Dumas) said, "Mi Hogar Orphanage is just a couple of blocks up the hill. We can walk up there anytime you wish."

That same day we visited some of the most beautiful children in the whole wide world. Their ages ranged from a few months to 16-year-olds. Radiologist Ricardo Castillejos and his lovely wife Rosie were the proud "parents" of 23 children who had been orphaned, abandoned, or just simply left there by parents who couldn't care for them.

Both the Castillejos and the kids lived in a wooden structure they had put together out of used building materials. The bathroom facilities were less than ideal and the lack of hot water for bathing helped in rushing the kids through their morning showers every day. The weather is cold in the Guatemala City area; so, long showers were not an option.

On our way back to the Dumas home, Cecilia talked nonstop about all the things those "dear" children needed.

"Honey," she tried to look me straight in the eye for added emphasis to her words, "did you see that tiny refrigerator they have? Why it is so small and so old the door doesn't even close. Did you notice

that?" she repeated.

"No, I didn't notice, Hon. I just noticed the kids; they are precious children. Ricardo and Rosie are doing a wonderful job." I said, feeling a little embarrassed for not noticing the old fridge.

"Yea, but the door doesn't even close," she repeated, seemingly oblivious to my comment. "And did you see what a small stove they use to cook for all those children? Oh, and did you see poor Rosie hanging clothes on the line, trying to get them dried in this cold, damp weather here in Guatemala?"

"Honey, I didn't go there to 'nose around' and see how these people live. I don't think that's very nice," I said somewhat defensively.

Cecilia wouldn't let up. "Honey..." She went on and on and on.

I was so glad our walk back to the Dumases was only a couple blocks.

Before long Cecilia had talked Amy Sanchez, her sister-in-law, who was with us on this trip, into trying to raise money in the States for some of these "badly needed items" at the orphanage.

I tried to remind my wife that our financial situation was not in the best shape to take on additional projects. Our travel expenses to Guatemala were about all we could handle. But, more often than not, when Cecilia and I "discuss" something, I reason with my mind while she thinks with her heart. She wins most discussions.

God was most gracious in providing for each of the things needed for the orphanage. Amy shared the need for a new refrigerator with one of her neighbors, who promptly handed her a check for the whole amount. A church in Illinois donated funds for a washer and a dryer. Others contributed finances to purchase a commercial, custom-made stove, a water heater, tennis shoes for all the kids, and many other gifts for us to take to Guatemala from the States. The appliances were bought in Guatemala through a Christian businessman, Brother Oscar Bobadilla, who was a tremendous help to us and the orphanage.

But, there was still one big need staring us in the face each time we visited Mi Hogar. They needed a new dormitory! It was difficult for Cecilia and me to even consider the possibility of building anything functional and adequate enough for these precious souls. We figured it would take an awful lot of money for such a huge project. Our

ministry funds had been provided through love offerings, cassette sales, a few individual donors, and church congregations. We have made it a practice not to make appeals for funds to carry out our work. So, even though I knew nothing would make my sweetheart happier than to take on this project, she was wise enough not to test my patience or my faith. Actually, we didn't think it was so much a lack of faith on our part as it was facing the facts of our situation.

"But God..."

Isn't that a stirring thought? God intervening in our lives when we have exhausted our abilities and resources and we see nothing but unfulfilled dreams and disappointment as the ultimate end to our most noble undertakings. It stirred the Apostle Paul's heart in Ephesians 2:4 regarding man's spiritually hopeless state. He declared: "But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love with which He loved us..." We have made the happy discovery that those words apply particularly to spiritual matters. But they are also applicable to our everyday problems. It worked for us in Guatemala. We could not afford a new dorm. But God came on the scene.

\*\*\*

The service was about to begin at the Beulah United Methodist Church near Sumner, Illinois, when Pastor Fred White pulled me aside. "Brother Simon, he asked, do you happen to have any projects in which my congregation can get involved? 'The natives are getting restless,' he said in jest. They enjoy helping in worthwhile projects, but at present I just don't have anything with which to keep them busy."

My immediate reaction was, Wow! Should I share about the dorm in Guatemala? "Lord, is that you speaking? You know my faith is the size of a shriveled up mustard seed. But for the sake of those kids' well-being, I'm going to stretch my faith and tell about Mi Hogar. Please help me as I share."

About the middle of the concert, I began to speak to these dearest of friends at Beulah about the much-needed dorm at Mi Hogar. They seemed genuinely interested. I felt God ministering to them through the music and information Cecilia and I provided. I was anxious to

see them respond in some visible fashion as to whether and how they would get involved in making this project a reality. But, the service ended without a positive sign of commitment on the part of anyone...or so I thought.

While we stood by the door shaking people's hands as they left the sanctuary, a dear brother named Joe Lathrop said something in my ear that practically blew me away.

"Simon," he whispered, "my wife and I have some money available that we want to invest in the work of the Lord. So far we have not been in complete agreement as to how we can make the best use of it. This project in Guatemala sounds like something we both might like to support. Let me talk to Dean (Gerald) about it. If she agrees, you can count on about ten thousand dollars or so."

"Oh, uh, my...that's terrific, Joe." I felt a lump in my throat that just wouldn't go down. I tried not to act overly excited, but I think if that lump hadn't been in my throat, my heart would've leaped out with the excitement of the moment. "I, uh, I trust Dean will agree, Joe," I mumbled.

The place was a little noisy as folks fellowshipped with one another before exiting the building. So I wasn't sure if Joe had said he had two thousand or ten thousand dollars available, and I was too embarrassed to ask him. Either way, if his wife agreed, that would be a clear sign from the Lord for us to start planning construction of the new dormitory.

After everyone had left the church, I shared with Pastor White what Joe had said.

"But Brother White, I am not quite sure whether Joe said he had two thousand or ten thousand dollars available for the project. Do you have any idea what he might have meant?"

"I have a pretty good idea, Simon. I believe he meant ten thousand dollars. Let me explain:

The Lathrop family has gone through a very difficult time in their lives. One of their children suffered a tragic accident recently and a life insurance policy taken out just prior to his untimely death has made this money available to the family. The Lathrops are some of the sweetest and most generous people you will ever meet, Brother Simon. Rather than spending this money on themselves, they want

others to benefit from it as a lasting memorial to their son. Both Joe and Gerald love you and Cecilia—and, of course, they love children. So I'm confident they will help with the orphanage."

\*\*\*

"*Hasta la vista baby...Pronto...Andale, andale...*" was the extent of the Spanish vocabulary Joe and the group from Sumner knew—with the exception of Jennifer Lathrop, who speaks the language fluently. The rest of the bunch used what they knew on each other and on the confused local contractor trying to work with us in Guatemala.

Joe is a high-energy character who doesn't let grass grow under his feet. He led the group by example and left the interpreting and the "go-for" jobs to me, while Cecilia helped with the cooking.

Once we had all the materials together, I tried to help with the manual work: carrying cement blocks, mixing mortar, tying re-bar (re-enforcing steel rods), etc. Everyone in the group would then take pictures of me so they could tell people back home I was "just posing" for the cameras. What precious times we had.

It took several trips to Guatemala before we could finish the project. The reasons for the slow pace were not only our lack of expertise as builders but because the government kept changing the building codes. Because of the frequency of earthquakes in the country we were required to use tons of re-enforcing steel on the foundations, through the walls, and in the roof. The dorm was a trilevel structure built on the side of a hill. Believe me, this building is going to be there through the thousand-year reign of Christ here on earth. Well, pretty close, I'm sure.

Needless to say, the Lathrop family invested much more time and money than we had anticipated. Some of the folks from Sumner also helped financially, while others went personally to help with the work. Involvement extended beyond the Beulah Church as friends became aware of the need. Even one of my golfing buddies from Ohio, Paul Steinmen, went on one trip. Our son Harry also took time off his job and joined us.

Working with Joe and the Beulah gang was a great delight to Cecilia

and me. We teased each other unmercifully as we worked and fellowshiped. But the greatest moments, to me personally, were when we came together during breaks. We'd open the Scriptures and expound them in a time of daily devotions. Other very special times were the evenings we spent with the children. After playing with them and letting them wrap themselves around our hearts, we would share music and Bible stories. Many came to know Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord during those special times. Our intentions were to be a blessing to the children, but instead, I really believe we received the greatest blessing.

The dormitory was finally finished. It is a beautiful building. Oh yes, there is now more than one bathroom—with hot water, no less. It is the Jason Lathrop dormitory just outside Guatemala City at the Mi Hogar Orphanage.

"...For as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these my children, you have done it unto me."



"Mi Hogar" orphanage before.



"Mi Hogar" after.

## THE TRYING OF OUR FAITH

No sooner than my head hit the comfortable pillow, I drifted off into a sound, restful sleep. Cecilia was still piddling around, finishing tasks she had left undone before we went to church a couple hours earlier. Then the phone rang. It was a call that forever impacted our lives and threw us into a whirlpool of emotions that only by the grace of God we would be able to overcome.

"Hello, is this the Avila residence?" The caller wanted to know.

"This is the Mansfield General Hospital Emergency room. Is Pauline Avila your daughter?"

"Yes, she is," Cecilia answered in a halting voice, sensing deep within her mother heart that something must be terribly wrong.

"There has been a car accident and we need to know if there are any medicines Pauline is allergic to—that you know of."

Before she answered that question, Cecilia in near panic, wanted to know the condition of our 15-month-old granddaughter, who had been riding in the car with Pauline.

The nurse placing the call, after obtaining the information regarding Pauline, in her most professional way explained that she was not at liberty to discuss our granddaughter's condition over the telephone. "But I recommend that you come to the hospital and bring someone with you as soon as possible."

"Honey, wake up!" Cecilia shouted as she shook me out of my deep slumber. "The hospital in Mansfield just called and told me Pauline and little Rachael were in an accident. Pauline is badly hurt but she wouldn't tell me how the baby is doing. Honey, we better hurry."

While my mind tried to convince me this was part of a horrible nightmare, my heart pounded fast and loudly as I faced the stark reality of death without really knowing for certain.

Mansfield General is perhaps twenty miles from our house. But it seemed to take an eternity to get there, even though I must have broken every speed limit through those country roads and city streets.

Once at the hospital we were asked to wait for another eternity, or so it seemed. We were told the attending physician would talk to us shortly.

Did we pray? Oh yes, did we ever! Our prayers, however—more than petitions—were cries of desperation: “Lord, give us strength, give us understanding, and give us wisdom.” I was doing my best to be a pillar of strength to my wife and children, who had huddled together by now in support of one another. I must confess, I felt more like a pillar of jelly. The pain was almost unbearable for all of us.

The doctor finally came into that tiny waiting room with a most somber face and broke the news: “Pauline is doing well, but I regret to tell you the baby did not survive the accident. I am very sorry.”

The news struck all of us like a thunderbolt.

In desperation I grabbed the doctor by the shoulders and shook him. “Doctor, you’re wrong!” I cried out. “Rachael can’t be dead. She’s only a child. She’s only a 15-month-old baby.”

In an understanding and compassionate gesture, the doctor placed his arms around me and repeated, “I am so sorry.”

As the doctor uttered those comforting words to the family, God flooded my spirit with His peace and comfort. It was nothing short of miraculous the way Scripture began to fill my mind. Deuteronomy 33:27 in particular ministered to me at that precise moment: “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms....” God not only imparted His peace to me, but also enabled me to be the help and support the family so desperately needed.

### A STAR IS BORN

Just a couple of hours before the accident happened, we had taken Rachael to participate in a children’s Christmas program put on by the Assembly of God Child Care Center where she attended. She was to have a big part (a few seconds) in the program. Grandma and Grandpa Avila were convinced this was to be Rachael’s “big break.” Tonight a star would be born.

Well, actually, I think all the other parents and grandparents had similar ideas about their children. There were cameras and video recorders everywhere.

The program was a tremendous success. Cecilia and I thought our granddaughter had outshone them all, of course. What could we say? She was simply marvelous.

After the program we all went to see some beautiful Christmas displays around the city. Christmas was only six days away. After that Cecilia and I drove home. Pauline would be coming soon after dropping off a close friend.

The evening was gorgeous, donning a fresh blanket of snow. The roads were slippery but not extremely dangerous. In Ohio one has to learn to drive under such conditions.

At a particularly winding stretch of road, Pauline was driving at approximately 35 miles an hour when she suddenly dozed off. Losing control of her car she hit a tree where the road curved to the right. (Note: Unbeknown to the family, Pauline was suffering from a rare sleeping disorder called Narcolepsy).

Rachael died instantly at the scene of the accident. Tonight, if the sky is clear, you can see her little star twinkling in the distance high above.

### SAD CHRISTMASSES

Rachael’s funeral was on December 21, so needless to say, our Christmas celebration that year was not as joyous as before. For the next two years or so our pain gradually diminished somewhat, but the Christmas holidays were still extremely difficult.

And so, you may wonder, did God care about our pain? Did He know how much we missed that little bundle of joy in our lives? Is He involved at all in our personal lives?

Well, will you believe this? Two years after Rachael’s untimely departure (our opinion), God gave our daughter Pauline a handsome, bouncing baby boy. Born...are you ready for this...? Born on Christmas day! No, little Jesse could not replace Rachael, but he brought back the joy of living and the glorious wonder of Christmas. God is awesome!

### MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

As our daughter convalesced at our home after a protracted stay at

the hospital, she shared something with me that was key to her emotional and spiritual recovery. In a most solemn and contrite tone of voice she confided: "Daddy, I believe I know why Rachael was killed in the accident and I wasn't. The way the car was so mangled; I should have been killed also. I am truly convinced the reason my life was spared was because I wasn't ready to meet Jesus. My baby was, and she'll be there with Him waiting for me to come home some day."

Of course, Daddy, being an evangelist and a father concerned about his children's eternal salvation, I asked the obvious question: "Honey, would you like to be ready right now?"

"Yes Daddy, please pray with me," she replied.

Rachael, your mission on this earth was accomplished admirably. You helped your Mommy find her way back to Jesus. As one of your friends remarked, perhaps accurately, you were a little runaway angel called home. You did your job well. Please know that your Mommy is serving Jesus. She is filled with His peace and her joy overflows. We'll see ya soon.

*Grandpa Simon.*

\*\*\*

*James 1:3-4 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*



Little Rachel went to be with Jesus after car accident, 1985.



Pauline and Rachel.



Pauline holds baby in El Salvador, C.A. 2001 mission trip.

## WHERE MOST NEEDED

It was a beautiful January Sunday morning in Ocala, Florida—not hot, just bright and sunny, a gorgeous day. As always, Cecilia and I were excited about singing at this particular community church. We had been there before so were looking forward to renewing acquaintances with these dear folks. As we carried our sound system into the church, one of the elders, with a rather sad look on his face, came and said, "Brother Simon, I'm afraid I have some bad news to tell you."

Of course, we immediately stopped what we were doing to hear whatever was weighing so heavily on our dear brother's heart. I thought for a moment I might have the wrong date; it's happened a time or two before. No, I wished that had been the problem.

"Brother Simon, our pastor tried to commit suicide last night here in the church kitchen. He slit his wrists and put a plastic bag over his head. Someone 'just happened' to come by and discovered him lying on the floor. He was taken to the hospital in time to save his life. You will have charge of the whole service this morning. I thought you should know."

"Lord," we began to pray, "these are your children, and they need your help. You brought us here. They need your comfort and direction. Use us as your instruments, we pray."

\*\*\*

The devastation and loss of lives in the city of Acapulco was indescribable. A hurricane had left nothing but pain and suffering for those living along that coastal area on the Pacific. While the city feverishly tried to restore its downtown area and all of its tourist attractions, those just a few blocks away coped as best they could with little or nothing they had managed to salvage.

It was soon after the hurricane that Cecilia and I were invited to share God's love and comfort at a local church under the auspices of OMS International. We packed our suitcases with as much as we could take to our friends. Our hearts were further broken when we actually saw the dire need so many people were experiencing. The few things we took were nothing in comparison with the needs we

encountered. Friends had given us about three thousand dollars to give out as we thought best. But again, it all seemed so little.

The Lord brought to our attention one particular elderly couple who had lost everything during the hurricane. They had literally watched their little house float away in the swift currents created by the flood. Their spirit was broken and tearful eyes betrayed the courage they tried to project.

"Honey, what are we going to do?" Cecilia asked me. "We can't possibly help everybody, but I believe the Lord would have us help this couple to rebuild their little house."

Well, three thousand dollars went a long way toward buying cement blocks, mortar, roofing materials and even some beds from Wal-Mart.

You could not find a happier couple in the world. They now knew that God loved them.

We were glad to be there.

\*\*\*

Pastor Macias thundered out the invitation to receive Christ as Lord and Savior at the basketball court in my hometown. His message had been clear, concise, and to the point. Everyone within hearing distance fell on their knees and prayed the sinner's prayer in unison. This was the beginning of a Christian witness in Paso Nacional, Durango.

On our subsequent visits there, God allowed us to take many friends from the U.S. for a construction project. Together we erected a church building and a parsonage. We continued to preach the Good News and eventually turned the work over to the Nazarene Church in that district. Three of my sisters came to know Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord of their lives. My father and my oldest brother also received with gladness the glorious Gospel. I had the joy of baptizing many people in the old muddy Nazas River where I had bathed and swum as a child.

We were glad to be there.

\*\*\*

Danny Lacy, a tremendously gifted pianist, worked with us for a period of two years. He was sensitive to the Holy Spirit and always wanting more and more of God in his life. When he played, he not only brought out beautiful music from those old pianos we often found in country churches, he radiated with the love and sweetness of Jesus. But we "lost" Danny; he became a full-fledged missionary teacher. Our loss became OMS International's gain.

We were glad to play a small part in his spiritual development and preparation for missionary work overseas.

\*\*\*

We met David Beam at a Family Camp in Charlevoix, Michigan. He was a handsome teenager doing his level best to impress girls with his famous "chug-a-lug act"—downing bottles of coke in one gulp. On one occasion he found a girl he wanted to impress, but they had run out of coke at the concession stand. So he tried doing his chug-a-lug with an orange drink. It didn't work. He ended up drenched in orange drink coming out of his nose and mouth.

David, however, was searching for purpose and meaning in his young life. In an autobiographical book he wrote years later, he credited us with being a source of inspiration for turning his life over to Christ at that camp meeting in Michigan.

David, his lovely Guatemalan wife Damaris, and family live in Guatemala City, serving God under the Missionary Ventures organization.

We didn't know that, David. But we're glad we were there.

\*\*\*

The Halfway House in Marion, Ohio, called, asking if we would open our home and lodge a woman who had come to them seeking help. Her abusive husband had threatened her life. They knew we lived out in the country where Loretta (not her real name) could "hide" for a while.

When we picked her up, in Cecilia's words, "Loretta looked like a broken doll." She was timid and understandably embarrassed, but

she accepted our love and the help we offered her.

In a few days of rest and tender loving care a new Loretta emerged from the cloud of fear and despair she'd been under for years. She was our "special guest" for a good while until her situation improved. The local authorities and county government had provided the assistance and the protection she needed for her safety and well-being.

*Mi casa es tu casa* (My house is your house), Loretta.

\*\*\*

Our house is not fancy, just roomy and cozy. Many a missionary and traveling evangelist have graced our home with their presence. We have yet to find one who didn't like Mexican food and freshly brewed coffee—or who objected to Cecilia's royalty treatment. She spoils them rotten.

Our pastor has a key to our home just in case we happen to be away and a guest speaker should need lodging.

I should mention one exception in regard to food. A Jewish brother and his wife spent a couple of days in our home but brought their own food. We were gone at the time, otherwise Cecilia would have found something kosher to feed them.

Come see us. We've got room.

\*\*\*

Because of the years of experience in ministry and the quality that God has allowed us to develop in our music, small congregations often are hesitant to invite us. When they find out, however, that our financial philosophy as a faith ministry has remained unchanged, and that "we will go wherever needed," they call. Even though we've had the unique privilege of singing to many thousands of people in one place, the greatest part of our work has been with those small groups. It has been their unsolicited generosity and that of a few individual supporters who have kept us going these many years at home and abroad.

You will often find us preaching and singing under a tent, in some storefront church, a jail, a nursing home, or at a sick friend's home.

78

We may use our full sound system with our prerecorded soundtracks or perhaps just a boom box and my old guitar.

Didn't the Apostle Paul say, "By all means to all men?"  
Just call.



Don and Jolene Harms: Farmers, Song evangelists and friends from Boae Gap, Illinois.



Cecilia's graduation at LPI in El Paso, Texas, standing with Mr. Petroff, English teacher.



Norm and Dora Brown, from Shauck, Ohio cared for Leticia while we traveled in ministry.

79





Our youngest daughter, Leticia, visits Ecuador, the land of her birth, with medical team sent out from First Assembly of God in Mansfield, Ohio.



Son Harry handing "mud" (concrete) to Jennifer Lathrop in Guatemala.



Orphanage in Acapulco.

## OUR MUSICAL JOURNEY

In an evangelistic crusade with our Mexican friend, the late Marcelino Ortiz, he made the following statement in one of his messages: "One way to know for certain that the Gospel message has penetrated the spirit of a nation or culture is when they begin to write their own Christian music and poetry." There is a great deal of truth in his observation. While Cecilia and I may not be representatives of an entire nation or culture in and of ourselves, Marcelino's statement holds true for us on an individual level. Our Christian experience and our presentation of the Gospel message gained a great deal of credibility, stability and authority when we began to write Christian songs.

The following are lyrics to some songs we have written. Let them inspire and bless you. I will include a brief comment about each of them. This is a journey in music.

\*\*\*

To Mr. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, I'll simply say:

### HE'S MORE THAN CREATOR

*He made the sea, the rivers, the oceans;  
He gave me strength, when I couldn't stand.  
He healed my heart, when it was breaking.*

*For He's more than Creator, provider or healer;  
Christ is my Savior and Lord.  
He's more than a father, companion or brother,  
Christ is my all in all.*

*He made me His own, a child of His Kingdom.  
He, He promised me, that He'll stand by me.  
He'll be closer to me than any other.*

*For He's more than Creator, provider or healer;  
Christ is my Savior and Lord.  
He's more than a father, companion or brother,  
Christ is my all in all.*

\*\*\*

Dr. Dwight Ferguson, missionary-evangelist with OMS International, sternly challenged me to check my music. "Make certain it talks about the blood of Christ and a personal relationship with Him." I had great respect and admiration for this seasoned warrior of the Cross. Here is what I wrote in answer to his challenge:

#### **FREED BY THE BLOOD**

*There's a proclamation of emancipation,  
"Every slave on earth has now been set free;  
The chains are all broken," reads the declaration;  
And it's signed with the crimson blood of the King.*

*I've been set free by a royal decree.  
My slave days are ended, there's freedom for me.  
Oh, I'll sing, "Hallelujah, at last I am free.  
Signed and delivered by the blood of the King."*

*The bondage is broken of sin and shame.  
In heaven is written for me a new name.  
The ransom was paid for you and for me,  
And it's signed with the crimson blood of the King*

*I've been set free by a royal decree.  
My slave days are ended there's freedom for me.  
Oh, I'll sing, "Hallelujah, at last I am free.  
Signed and delivered by the blood of the King."*

*Signed and delivered by the blood of the King.*

\*\*\*

Loneliness, discouragement, and despair are feelings Satan often plants in the hearts of many of God's children. He (Satan) tries to undermine, abuse, and misuse the promises of God. Jesus' answer was, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord Thy God" (Matthew 4:7). Here is God's promise from Psalm 91: 11-12:

#### **HE'S GIVEN ANGELS CHARGE (Over you)**

*When you've come to the end of a highway,  
And you feel that your life is all through.  
Just remember don't you cry in dismay,  
He's given angels charge over you.*

*He's given angels charge over you.  
He'll not cause you to stumble or fall.  
He's given angels charge over you.  
They'll bear you up. They won't let you fall.*

*And when you've reached all the fame and success,  
And you find that your heart is still blue.  
Just remember in your hour of loneliness,  
He's given angels charge over you.*

*He's given angels charge over you  
He'll not cause you to stumble or fall.  
He's given angels charge over you  
They'll bear you up. They won't let you fall.*

*They'll bear you up. They won't let you fall.*

\*\*\*

Someone has said that God uses our children as levelers of our theology. Just when Mom and Dad think they have things under control, one of the children goes off on a tangent. They will come back, however, if you "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).  
From personal experience:

#### THE PRODIGAL

*I will arise I'm going home.  
I ain't gonna stay here in Babylon.  
My father is waiting; He's waiting for me.  
I will arise I'm going on home.*

*My father's servants have plenty to spare,  
But my soul is hungry I just can't go on.  
I'm longing to feel my father's care.  
I will arise I'm going on home.*

*I will arise I'm going home.  
I ain't gonna stay here in Babylon.  
My father is waiting; He's waiting for me.  
I will arise I'm going on home.*

*I won't look back; my past is behind.  
But I will be safe in my father's arms.  
I'm leaving behind the husks and the swine.  
I will arise I'm going on home.*

*I will arise....*

\*\*\*

The idea for the "Give them love and healing oil" song came partly from reading the Good Samaritan story in the Bible and partly from seeing the multitudes of needy people across North, Central, and South America.

#### GIVE THEM LOVE AND HEALING OIL

*Many times in this long journey;  
People fall and bruise their soul.  
They are shattered, crying, lonely;  
They need love and healing oil.  
There's people all around,  
Looking in but going on,  
They can't stop to lend a hand;  
So the hurt keep hurting on.*

*Give a hand to those you find,  
Lest some day you slip and fall.  
Sooth a broken, troubled mind;  
Give them love and healing oil.*

*There's a place of broken dreams,  
Filled with heartaches, tears, and toil.  
Where the sun no longer shines,  
Folks need love and healing oil.*

*Jesus said to love your neighbors,  
Bind their wounds and heal the blind.  
Teach them all that I have said;  
I will give them peace of mind.*

*Give a hand to those you find,  
Lest some day you slip and fall.  
Sooth a broken troubled mind,  
Give them love and healing oil.*

Repeat chorus

Tag: *Sooth a broken troubled mind,  
Give them love and healing oil.*

\*\*\*

Of all the songs I've been inspired to write, there is one Cecilia just cannot stand for me to sing. At least she "pretends" to dislike it a lot. I called it "Woe Is Me." It is done in a humorous manner but people don't fail to see the depth of its message. It is often requested in our concerts.

Here it is:

### WOE IS ME

*I was singing a song called, "Woe is me"  
Having a time in my misery.  
The lines and the chorus were woe is me.  
I was singing the blues to woe is me.*

*Woe is me; oh, woe is me.  
I sang that old tune that was wrecking me.  
Jesus came down, gave me victory;  
Now I won't sing the blues to woe is me.*

*I threw pity parties, you shoulda heard me.  
I took pride in singing, oh, woe is me.  
The lines and the chorus were woe is me.  
I was singing the blues to woe is me.*

*Woe is me; oh, woe is me.  
I sang that old tune that was wrecking me.  
Jesus came down, gave me victory;  
Now I won't sing the blues to woe is me.*

*Woe is me....*

\*\*\*

God established a covenant with Noah in the ninth chapter of the book of Genesis, that He never again would destroy life on the earth by water. As a sign of this covenant He promised to set a rainbow in the cloud as a token (sign) to remind Himself of His perpetual agreement with all flesh on planet earth.

In a figurative sense, I see Jesus as our rainbow in the New Testament. Regardless of the intensity and fury of any of life's storms, we can look to Jesus and know of a truth we shall not be utterly destroyed. That's the reason for our "Rainbow" song.  
Listen carefully:

### RAINBOW

*Help me to see the rainbow  
Shine at the end of my storm.  
Give me the strength to follow;  
Give me the strength to go on.*

*When doubts and fears surround me,  
When my eyes are filled with tears,  
When I'm far from home and lonely,  
He'll give me strength to go on.*

*Help me to see the rainbow  
Shine at the end of my storm.  
Give me the strength to follow;  
Give me the strength to go on.*

*When I reach my home in heaven,  
Where no tear shall dim my eye.  
I'll lay down my every burden.  
He'll give me strength to go on.*

*Help me to see the rainbow  
Shine at the end of my storm.  
Give me the strength to follow;  
Give me the strength to go on.*

In Matthew 2:1-12 we find the marvelous story of three wise men from the East. They came into Jerusalem saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."

This is our Christmas song:

#### THEY WERE FOLLOWING HIS STAR

*Three wise men from the Orient came looking for the King.  
They were looking for the answer that would give them  
peace of mind.*

*They had heard the voice of reason claiming to have  
known,*

*The beginning of creation, the purpose for all men.  
But they came to find the answer, in a stable in Bethlehem.*

*They were looking for the King. They were looking for the  
King.*

*They were looking for the King. They were looking for the  
King.*

*They came from far; they were following His star.  
They came from far; they were following His star.*

*He was born in Bethlehem. Yes, He was born in Bethlehem.  
He was born in Bethlehem. Yes, He was born in  
Bethlehem.*

*They came from far; they were following His star.  
They came from far; they were following His star.*

\*\*\*

In Isaiah 9:6-7 we read: "and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father. The Prince of Peace...Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end." And Romans 14:17 says: "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." Then in Revelation 5:10, "And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth."

#### JESUS WILL REIGN FOREVER

*Now Jesus will reign forever,  
His Kingdom will never end.  
He's gonna reign forever,  
I'm gonna reign with Him.*

*His Kingdom is righteousness,  
Righteousness, peace, and joy.  
Righteousness, peace, and joy  
In the Holy Ghost.*

*Now, Jesus will reign forever,  
His Kingdom will never end.  
He's gonna reign forever,  
And I'm gonna reign with Him.*

*Wonderful, Counselor,  
A mighty God He is.  
Our everlasting Father.  
He is The Prince of Peace.*

*Yes, Jesus will reign forever,  
His Kingdom will never end.  
He's gonna reign forever,  
I'm gonna reign with Him*

Repeat Chorus.

\*\*\*

The melody to each song is rather simple and most of them have been recorded in a country-Gospel style. Performance soundtracks are available. If anyone should be interested in recording any of these songs with your own tracks, you have our permission to do so with no financial obligation.

"Music is the language of the soul," some wise person said.



Pauline doing mission work  
in El Salvador, C.A.



Laila and Craig in  
Acapulco, giving  
out toys at  
orphanage.



Craig and friend.

## HIS PROVISION

One of the most fascinating facets of our work has been to see the way God has provided for our needs. We often have made suggestions to Him in prayer as to how and when He should supply whatever need we were facing at the moment—as if He didn't know. More often than not, however, His answers come in the most unexpected ways. Dr. C. M. Ward, renowned radio speaker, said in one of his messages, "God is always on time; He's never late. However, He often seems to delight Himself in scaring the living daylights out of us. But He's never late."

We hear you, Dr. Ward.

\*\*\*

In the area of transportation good vehicles are a must. In our line of work we must have either a new vehicle every so often or lots of grace to keep the old ones running. During our years of traveling we have literally logged millions of miles across the U. S., Mexico, and Canada.

At one particular juncture in our ministry we were using an old Pontiac station wagon. It was rusty and the tailgate refused to open as it was designed to do. The mileage on the odometer was a mystery, but the engine ran like a top.

One summer evening Cecilia and I were home relaxing a little and enjoying our kids, when a car turned into our driveway. We were not expecting company, but once in a while people come—maybe looking for some address—then turn around and drive off. Well, this car drove all the way to our side door and stopped. The doorbell rang and to our delight and surprise it was our beloved friends, Claire and Lu Nussbaum, from Wooster, Ohio. We talked for a long time and just enjoyed sweet fellowship in the Lord.

When they decided it was time to go home, we were reluctant to end our visit. We hugged and Cecilia and I couldn't stop thanking them for coming to see us. Claire, however, kept trying to get a word in. So finally he motioned for us to shush up for a second. He has a quiet demeanor but can command authority when necessary.

"Uh," he began, "God has placed a desire on our hearts to donate a new station wagon for your ministry. We have taken the liberty of writing your name. 'The Singing Avilas, from Mt. Gilead, Ohio,' on the side doors and the back. We hope that's OK?" Claire said this as Lu handed us the keys to the wagon.

"Really?" Cecilia and I echoed in unison and total shock. "You did? You have?" We just didn't know what to say.

"It's sitting right out there in your driveway."

"But we only saw one set of headlights coming into our drive," Cecilia weakly argued while trying to hold back the tears.

"Well," Claire replied thoroughly enjoying the moment, "We turned the headlights off the wagon a quarter of a mile before we got to your house."

"You sneaky characters."

At a missions conference at the First Church of God in Alma, Michigan, we were asked to share with the congregation about a typical and most recent trip in our ministry. (This had been our home church during our early days of marriage and ministry). They wanted to get a better idea as to how we went about our work so they could help and pray for us in a more specific manner. We decided to share about our trip to Arizona earlier that year.

Our assignment had been to minister to some 400 Mexican migrant workers at a farm located between Yuma and Phoenix, right in the middle of the desert. This desert land had been made productive through a complicated (I thought) irrigation system. It was grape and honeydew melon harvest time.

We had been driving the second station wagon donated by the Nussbaums, and the mileage on it was nearing the 230,000-mile mark. Our radiator had developed leaks as we traveled across New Mexico and the transmission was in constant need of repair. The added expenses had completely depleted our finances. But we reached our destination safely and anxious to see how God would work in our lives in the coming days.

Well, the people responded admirably to our singing and preaching of the Gospel. Several people came to know Christ as their personal Savior and Lord, while others received ministry for healing

and for restoration of broken relationships. God moved in might and power in the lives of many of those precious people.

For reasons beyond our control, we were unable to establish contact with the owner of the farm, who was to provide financial assistance during our time there. We did have a nice place to stay, but our diet included lots and lots of grapes and honeydew melons. We were broke.

After we finished our assignment at the farm we managed to make it to Phoenix. We had scheduled a few concerts there—that we hoped would provide enough finances to make it back home to Ohio.

Now, at the risk of sounding simplistic and appearing to be an off-the-wall fanatic, allow me to say that God literally opened the windows of heaven and poured out finances from most unexpected sources. We sang at small mission churches and big churches. We sang at an Arabian horse farm for the workers. And a couple of tourists from central Ohio, who recognized our name on the back of the wagon, ran me down to say hi—and to hand us an offering they felt God had impressed them to give. God provided for all our needs.

After getting a clearer understanding about our vicissitudes and triumphs in a "typical" assignment in our ministry, the Alma Church of God congregation has continued, and increased, its support of our organization through prayer and financial assistance.

Two days after our visit to Alma, Michigan, a young couple who had known us since our early days at the church, called to share a burden God had laid on their hearts. They had learned at the conference about our transportation needs.

"Simon," I heard our friend Jesse Meyer say over the telephone. "Will you and Cecilia go and look for a new van that would be comfortable and functional for your ministry needs? Call me when you find it, and I will send you a check for the entire cost."

At the dealership in Mansfield, Ohio, near where we live, the salesman half-heartedly showed me the GMC van we had selected. "How much money do you have for a down payment?" he wanted to know.

"Well, actually, we don't have any money with us, but we should be able to pick it up in a couple of days. Do you think you can have it ready by then?" I asked him.

"But how do you expect to pay for it?" he sounded a bit exasper-

ated.

"Cash."

"Oh."

God has used the Nussbaums from Ohio, Jesse and Marissa Meyer (not their real names) from Michigan through their charitable foundation, and other friends from around the country to provide for our transportation needs. May God reward them for their faithfulness to the work of His great Kingdom.

\*\*\*

The salaries we draw from our organization are not exorbitant by any means. They are just enough to pay our bills, and buy food and clothes to wear. Our lifestyle is rather simple, yet comfortable. We have raised four healthy kids who cannot say they were ever hungry or went without things they needed because of Mom and Dad being in the ministry. Oh, they can say it just to tease and aggravate their daddy. In reality they even enjoyed a few luxuries that other kids thought were "cool." God has always been there for us when we needed a "little extra help."

Some of God's choicest people live in a small town called Bone Gap, in southern Illinois. They are farmers for the most part with hearts as big as the land they own. They are generous people, God-fearing people. Our friendship goes back a long way. Some of them have traveled with us to the mission field on different occasions and their support of our work is unending. They lodge us, feed us, and fill up our gas tank when we're in the area. If they happen to be away at the time, we know where they hide the keys to their houses. We just make ourselves at home.

For a long time before they closed their hog businesses we would receive a call to pick up a hog they had butchered and frozen at the local meatpacking company. Other times it might be a side of beef. They raise the sweetest corn in the world, the best green beans, etc. Our 'fridge' was never empty.

Another friend from Sanford, Michigan, worked at a grocery store for a long time. She kept us supplied with canned food. It would be in damaged cans or those with no labels. It became an interesting

experience for Laila and Pauline when Mom would send them downstairs to bring up a can of corn or some other food she needed. "There are no labels on the cans," they would holler from the basement. "Well, pray over them. I'm sure it will be just what we need," Mom would answer. It usually was! Can you see why I say that our children never went hungry?

God is faithful.

\*\*\*

A question we often get is: "How could you travel when your children were small?"

Actually, in some areas of the ministry, we feel God has spoiled us terribly. Caring for our children has been one of those areas. Cecilia's mother would not let us leave them with anybody other than "Grandma." She considered this to be her "ministry," her "calling." Our girls had her wrapped around their little fingers. A gracious, loving person, she was a genuine push over—one of a kind. She still watches over them from her home in the sky.

Dorothy May (Tanner), a young public schoolteacher, quit her teaching job when our son Harry was born. She lived with us for a long time. We could not afford to pay her a salary, but she made the sacrifice because of her love for Jesus, for our work, and for us.

When Laila and Pauline made their all-important transition into teen years, God gave me the opportunity to travel with Evangelist Luz Gonzalez. So, Mom stayed home to see them through those first two critical years of young-adulthood.

It should be mentioned that much of the work has been close to home. Our involvement in missions is something we do, as funds are made available. We made it a practice not to be gone from the children for long periods of time without one of us (Cecilia) staying home. We have considered our kids to be our primary responsibility.

When our youngest daughter, Leticia, was one year old, we moved to Ohio. So we waited on the Lord to guide us to the people best suited to care for Lety. Well, lo and behold, Cecilia felt led to a young couple from a nearby church we visited. When she asked if they would



consider taking care of our little girl, they felt we were bestowing the greatest honor on them they had ever received. When we asked how much money we should pay them, they seemed insulted. "Please, let us do this as a contribution to your ministry. You do not have to pay us anything." Norm and Dora Brown loved our daughter as if she were their very own child.

As adults our children look after Mom and Dad in every way they possibly can. Our oldest daughter, Laila, and her husband Craig are two of the largest financial supporters of our ministry. God is faithful!

\*\*\*

After I left my job at the shoe factory in Michigan, our hospital and medical insurance coverage ended. For several years we lived totally trusting on the mercy of God for our health. Through Harry's football and wrestling career in school, through Pauline's cheerleading years, and through all of Laila's and Lety's athletic participation God was most gracious in keeping us from major problems.

As we took part in a missions conference at the Pine Castle United Methodist Church in Orlando, Florida, a group to which we were assigned for ministry, inquired if Cecilia and I had any insurance coverage. (Cecilia had not been able to be with me for Sunday services due to a severe cold). When they found out we had no coverage, they immediately voted to get us started on an insurance program. They took the responsibility of paying the premiums for an entire year. As it turned out, they ended up paying for more than three years—until some of the members moved away and the group merged with others from the church.

They started us off with excellent coverage and the Lord has provided ever since for us to keep up the premiums.

He provides!

\*\*\*

We will say with Paul in the book of Philippians chapter four, verses 11-13 and 19:

I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.  
I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound:  
every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.  
I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.  
But my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus."



Rob Novell at "Counterpoint" studios recording album "CHOSEN."



Charles Novell  
producer,  
pianist, singer,  
arranger.  
Chuck Seitz,  
QCA recording  
engineer in  
Cincinnati.



Joe Lathrop  
working at  
"Mi Hogar."



Feeding homeless  
people in St.  
Petersburg,  
Florida.

## WHAT A THRILL

It is impossible to imagine a greater thrill in life than helping others cross over the threshold of faith into the immediate presence of God. Whether they be intoxicated with pleasure and material success or simply groping in the darkness of meaninglessness, confusion, and despair. It is wonderful to see them come alive as they break through into the liberty and reality of Kingdom life and God's provision.

To hear my friend, John Wakely, say to me, "Simon, I've got it!"  
"What is it that you've got, John?"  
"Jesus did it all for me, Simon, I simply believed!"  
What a colossal revelation!

To hear my brother-in-law say to Cecilia and me, "I want to have what you guys have." He didn't say, "I want to act like you act, talk like you talk or walk the way you walk." He just said, "I want to have what you have."

"Tony, all that we have is Jesus in our hearts and in our lives."  
"That's exactly what I want."  
What a joy!

Hearing a cleaning lady in a retreat facility in Mexico City say to me, "Sir, are you with the group having these conferences?"

"Yes ma'am. I am," was my answer.

"Could you talk to me about the Bible?"

Oh, could I?

"OK; you talk, I'll work. Just follow me." (I liked that arrangement).

She prayed to receive Jesus as her Savior and Lord of her life after our conversation.

To hear my extremely religious sister say, "I think I'm saved, I hope I am, I think I am."

Now she knows!

The joy of hearing many a farmer say to me, "Simon, will you have your wife sing, 'It's Me Again, Lord?'" I really need to hear that."

To have someone say, "Brother Simon, will you remember me in prayer? I have not felt well for some time."

"Well, brother or sister, why not call on the name of Jesus right now?"

Praying for Brother Wilson, a convicted killer, at the Jackson, Michigan, federal penitentiary, and seeing him lift himself off the floor bathed in tears with a glow on his face and the joy of a new life in Christ Jesus.

Seeing the multitudes at a soccer stadium coming in droves, young and old, rich and poor. Then hearing them pray, "Lord Jesus, I believe You died for me. Save my soul, and help me live for You the rest of my life." Others call on His name at an altar of prayer in a church, in their homes, or at work—wherever the Spirit of Christ makes them aware of their need of Him.

Our address appears at the beginning of this book. Please let us know if we can be of help. Silver and gold we may not have, but such as we have we will give you. We'll give you Jesus.





## Where Needed

by Simon Avila

A book of inspiration that speaks volumes of God's power, protection, and ministry through two people who love Him dearly. You laugh, cry and praise God simultaneously as you see His marvelous grace in action. It is true that behind every good man there is a good woman - it is obvious in this story. But you will also learn that behind every committed couple there is a great God waiting to do unbelievable things.

Rev. Ray Music  
St. Paul United Methodist Church  
Gahon, Ohio

"Where Needed" sums up the life and ministry of the Singing Avilas! Wherever there is a need, Simon and Cecilia are willing to go. They live according to what the prophet Isaiah said: "Here I am, Lord, send me!" I praise God for sending them to our church many times. They have challenged us always in their gentle, Latin way to be willing to go wherever we're needed. Read their book, invite them to your church, and you'll find that your heart was also where they were needed!

Dr. Ed Humley  
Pastor, The Federated Church  
E. Springfield, PA

"Where Needed" is an incredible account of how God used the committed lives of Simon and Cecilia Avila. He took Simon out of a shoe factory and has used him - along with his wife - in sharing His Word through Christ-centered music and preaching. While Pastor of Living Gospel Church we cherished having them as our guests in our home and at our church. I highly recommend the reading of this book. It will challenge and thrill your hearts.

Rev. Otto Beer, Pastor Emeritus  
Naponee, Indiana

## Where Needed



by Simon Avila

# *Where Needed*



*by Simon Avila*